

The dreams that you FEAR will come true.

Disney

CHILLS



THE CIRCLE OF TER-ROAR

VERA STRANGE

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THE CIRCLE OF TER-ROAR

by
Vera Strange

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Contents

Title Page

Copyright

Epigraph

1: Scaredy-Cat

2: The Circle of Life

3: Aunt Scarlett

4: Life's Not Fair, Is It?

5: Camp Pride Rock

6: No Worries? All the Worries!

7: Disaster Is in the Air

8: Hakuna Matata

9: The Pride Lands

10: The Elephant Graveyard

11: Quiver With Fear

12: Good Night, Sweet Prince

13: Swallow Your Pride

14: The Lion Creeps Tonight

15: Oh, Goody

16: The Morning Report

17: Every Grunt, Roar, and Snort

18: Can You Feel the Terror Tonight?

19: The Truth Is in the Eye of the Beholder

20: A Roaring Success

21: Sire, the Herd Is on the Move

22: You Can Run, But You Can't...*Hide*

23: Can't Wait to Be King

24: Teeth and Ambitions Bared

25: Carnivores, Oy!

26: Be Prepared!

27: The Circle of Ter-Roar

28: A Monkey's Brother

29: Rafiki

30: The Coup of the Century

31: The Lion's Share

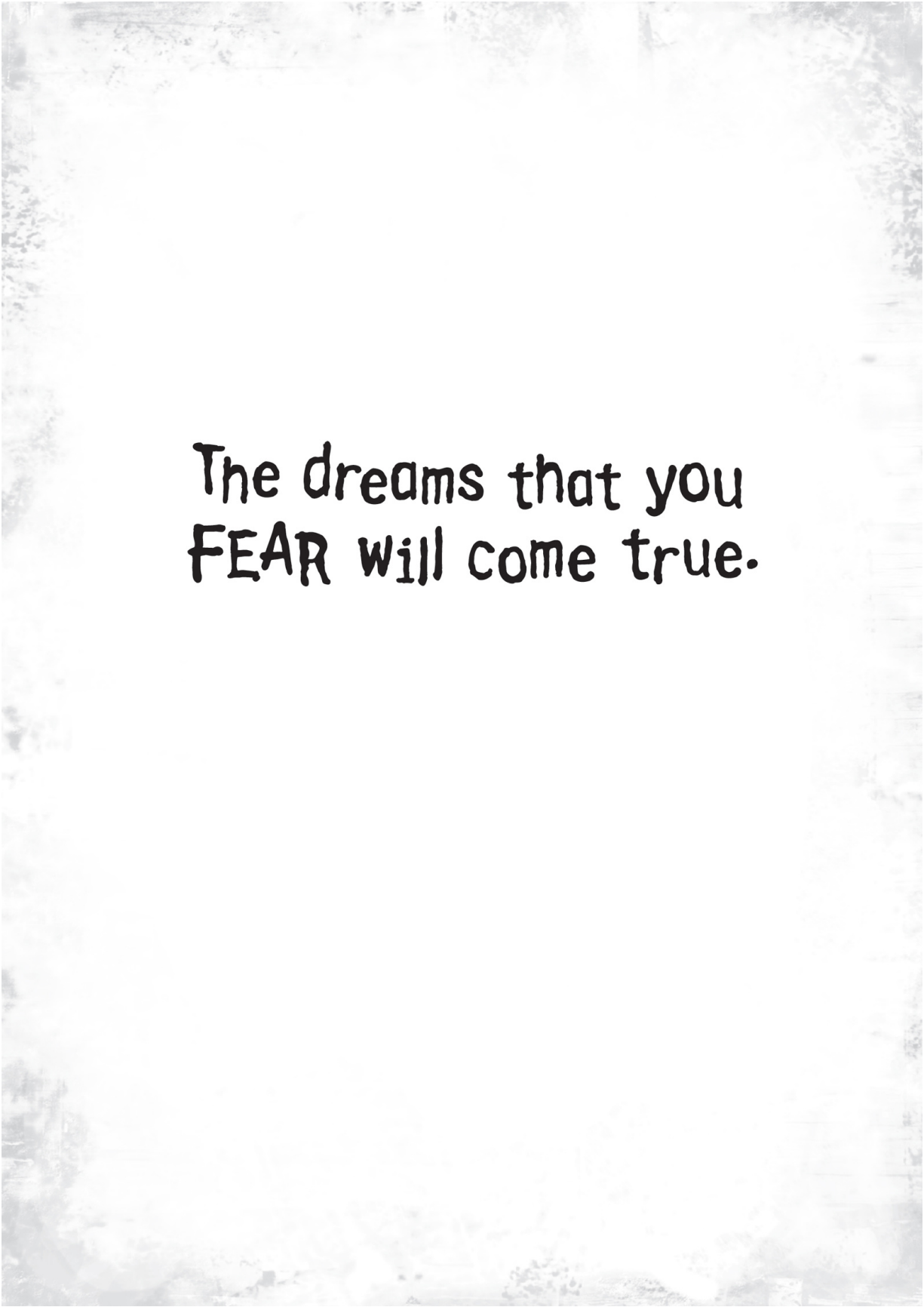
32: Change Is Good

33: Zazu

34: The King Undisputed

35: Long Live the King

About the Author



The dreams that you
FEAR will come true.





Silas wasn't sure how his life could get any worse.

It was the first day of summer break. Most kids were thrilled for three months of no school, zero homework, sleeping late, loads of free time, and perpetual sunshine, although that wasn't unusual in his hometown of Orlando, where it was warm and sunny all year round.

But not Silas...he was *miserable*.

He cracked his eyes open to bright sunlight and clear blue skies outside his window—*typical* Florida weather. The vertical blinds flapped lazily in the draft siphoned from the air vents, casting bars of light around his bedroom. It felt more like a prison.

He badly wished the yellow bus would come careening down his cul-de-sac and break him out of his house, taking him to school. But it was summer, and that wasn't going to happen.

Silas sighed and turned his gaze back to his room. Though it was humid and sweltering outside, his room was chilled down to a perfect seventy-two degrees, thanks to the air-conditioning's constant blasting.

Despite the beautiful, bright day, his heart still thumped from a horrible nightmare. He tried to remember it. All he knew was that he'd been falling and falling, overwhelmed by that terrible feeling where the floor drops out from under you and your stomach—

And then his memory went *black*.

Sweat stains soaked his sheets and pillow. Fear gripped him, along with that terrifying falling sensation. It took him a moment to calm his breathing and come back to reality.

I'm okay...it was only a dream...nothing to be afraid of...

Silas tried to focus on his surroundings and wake up fully. Library books weighed down his Buzz Lightyear bedspread, a relic from when he was still in elementary school. He didn't even watch those kiddie movies anymore, but his parents refused to waste money on replacing things that "worked perfectly well."

He rubbed his tired eyes and sat up in bed, trying to push the sleep from them. When he cracked them back open, he startled as they fell on—

A ferocious lion snarling at him.

His heart thumped. This was just like his terrifying nightmare the previous night. He didn't have to wonder what triggered it. The culprits lay right in front of him.

The library books.

One stared back at him with a thick-maned, regal-looking lion on the glossy cover. It was a nonfiction book called *The King of the Beasts*. As usual, he had stayed up way past his bedtime reading. He never meant to, but books had magical powers—which was the only explanation—that sucked him into their pages and wouldn't let go, until he nodded off with them cracked open in his lap.

Bits and pieces of his nightmare started to come back to him, almost like scenes from a movie. An evil lion with glowing green eyes had been stalking him. Silas tried to run away from the ferocious beast, but the lion was too fast and chased him off a cliff. He clung to the edge with his feet dangling over the treacherous drop.

The lion crept over, as if to save him...but instead, the lion clawed at his hands. Silas screamed as he lost his grip—

And fell toward the ground, and most likely his death.

That was the last thing he remembered before he woke up. He knew that he should stop reading the books if they gave him nightmares every night,

but he couldn't help it.

Evident from what was scattered across his bedspread, Silas loved two kinds of books the most. The first was real-life nature books filled with colorful images of wild animals—especially the kind with sharp teeth. The more ferocious the animal, the better.

He got goose bumps simply reading about those fearsome creatures, or looking at their pictures, and imagining that somewhere out there, far away from the boring suburb with a quiet cul-de-sac where he lived, those creatures roamed through the wilderness—and might spring out and eat you. His absolute favorite animals were lions—of course—black panthers, and leopards, with an honorable mention to great white sharks and polar bears.

The second type of book he loved was filled with action, telling stories about brave explorers embarking on dangerous adventures to discover new lands. *Tarzan of the Apes* by Edgar Rice Burroughs remained his all-time favorite. Silas owned a paperback copy of that one, thanks to his dad and a dusty sale bin at a used bookstore. He had read it so many times that the pages were dog-eared and crumbling. He preferred the old book to the many movie versions, though his friends thought he was unbelievable for liking words more than something you could watch on TV.

Basically, he read to escape from his regular life, and those types of books were the furthest thing from his daily, boring existence. He also read to pretend he wasn't a timid little kid afraid of...well...

Everything.

When Silas read his books, he felt brave and strong—like he could defeat any enemy or triumph over any challenge. But as soon as he closed the pages, he turned back into a...

Scaredy-cat.

The nasty nickname flashed through his head.

However, he didn't like to think about that.

Silas shifted around, knocking some books onto the floor. They landed with a sharp *thwack*. The jolt woke up the digital clock on his bedside table. It was already past nine a.m. He'd slept in for once. His alarm remained dormant, unset and unnecessary.

Silas sat up, trying to get himself up after his reading-induced insomnia, and surveyed his bedroom. It looked like a normal kid's room with a narrow twin bed and a wobbly bookshelf overfilled with tomes, some spilling out

onto the floor. There was also a giant pile of dirty laundry that he'd been putting off washing. He was twelve, old enough to do chores and help out—at least according to his parents—though all evidence pointed to the contrary.

The laundry heap had grown perilously high and threatened to topple over and create an avalanche across his whole room, burying everything in sight, including him. Sooner or later it would get him into big trouble when his parents bothered to notice, but for now it kept growing taller.

Silas let out a deep sigh. “Ugh, summer.”

He missed school for *three* big reasons. One, he got to see his best friends, Jose and Tamara, first thing every morning at the bus stop. They lived on the same street and had been friends since the first day of kindergarten. They had sat together on the bus, and the rest was history. Every day with them by his side qualified as a great day.

And two, he loved reading, and his sixth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Hamlet, always picked out the best books from the library for him. She chose the adventure kind filled with thrilling expeditions to faraway places, and heroes who were never afraid of...well...*anything*. They were fierce and courageous—basically, the total opposite of him, although he tried to hide his fears and anxieties so nobody found out and teased him about it.

But the truth was far different. Even the sight of his own shadow spooked him sometimes. He often jumped coming around corners, then tried to brush it off so as not to draw notice. Not to mention creepy spiders (eight legs and eight eyes, plus venom...why did anyone like Spider-Man?). Traffic (Dad said Florida drivers were *special*). Clowns (they smiled too much). Dark basements (not that there were any in Florida, but he'd seen enough spooky movies to know they existed for no good reason other than to get you killed). And broccoli (it was basically an alien vegetable). He had a long list of phobias.

He was even *afraid* of being *afraid*...this unknown sinking feeling about the future.

And the worst one of all—that somebody would find out about his cowardice, like that incident in first grade, and everyone would taunt him.

Scaredy-cat.

He shuddered at the memory. Even his friends Jose and Tamara had laughed at him for being scared of that stuffed spider in the toy bin. But

Silas couldn't help how his heart hammered, his breathing got short and spastic, and fear flooded through his whole body, making it feel rigid.

He'd backed away from the chest while the other kids yelled, "Scaredy-cat! Scaredy-cat!"

"He's afraid of a stuffed animal!"

"Go back to kindergarten!"

Ever since then, he'd avoided toy bins and vowed to keep his fear in check so it would never happen again. And it had worked. No more fear attacks. No more taunts of "scaredy-cat." School had been great since then. But always in the back of his mind, he could hear the kids teasing him—

Loud shrieks exploded from his parents' bedroom across the hall.

They cut through the house.

"Wahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."

That was the third reason Silas missed school. It got him out of the house. And away from—

His baby brother.

The cries grew shriller and louder. Silas winced and tried to plug his ears, but it did no good. Police sirens were quieter than baby George.

If he hadn't been fully awake yet, Silas sure was now. The shrieking continued and showed zero signs of letting up. Mom called it colic.

But Silas suspected it was George's way of demanding all his mother's attention so there was none left over for him. And George didn't just cry during the day, but off and on all night long, waking up everyone in the house whenever he pleased.

Wishing he had thick headphones—the heavy-duty noise-canceling kind worn by construction workers—Silas got himself up and sifted through the dirty laundry pile for something clean enough to wear. The mound threatened to collapse. Pulling out clothes was like playing Jenga.

He settled on a T. rex shirt with a chocolate stain smudged across the sleeve from where he'd wiped his mouth. However, chocolate didn't count as a stain, he decided, since it was the single best thing in the world. Silas thought that it was more like...a badge of honor.

He pulled on his board shorts—good for playing and swimming—and glanced in the mirror, trying to flatten his dark hair. His bangs were too long and badly needed a trim. Silas's bronze skin absorbed the sunlight, turning richer and more golden as summer dragged on, and his hazel eyes were the color of fresh straw.

Dad would muss his hair. “Ha, but that’ll never change.”

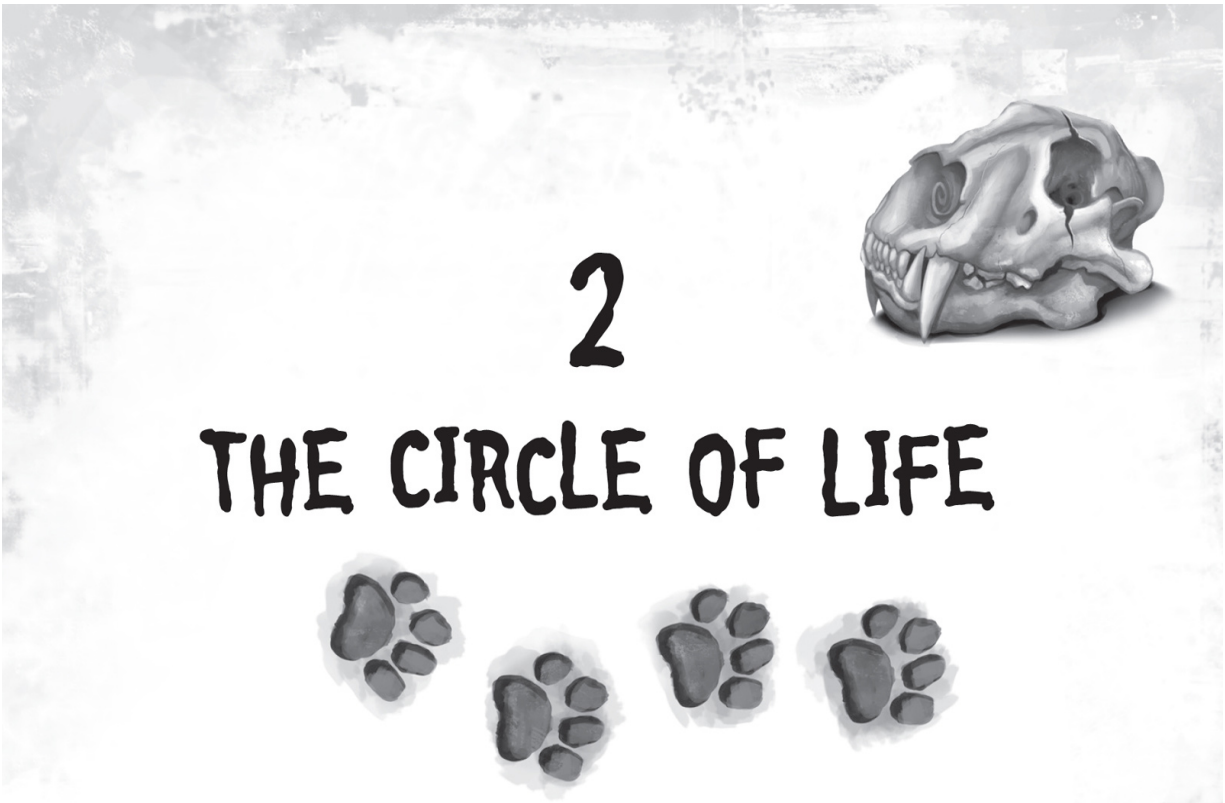
“Promise?” Silas would say.

“Promise,” Dad would reply, sweeping him into a tight hug.

Only it had...

Silas sniffed the air hopefully, wishing for pancakes, but it only smelled of stale coffee. No cooking aromas hung in the air. No sounds of happy chatter. His heart sank. With a heavy sigh, Silas trudged downstairs to the ceaseless wailing of his baby brother, as it reverberated through the house. George was miserable, and nothing was going to change that today.

Cold cereal will have to do...again, Silas thought glumly.



“Good morning, Son,” Dad called from the sunken living room of their small two-story house when he heard Silas poking around in the fridge. “Or should I say *afternoon*,” he joked.

Dad was a fan of...dad jokes.

The fact that he was playing around made Silas happy. Maybe Silas’s day was about to get a whole lot better than he thought. His dad was teasing him for sleeping late that morning.

“Hey, Daddo,” he replied, peeking out from the narrow kitchen. He had to speak up to be heard over George’s crying. “And I didn’t sleep that late...sheesh. It’s still morning.”

But then George’s crying turned into wailing. “Wahhhhhhhhhh” reverberated from upstairs, rising and falling in volume like a fire engine blaring down the street.

“What did you say?” Dad called back.

“I said *it’s still morning*,” Silas tried again, raising his voice.

“What...was...that?” Dad shouted back.

It was futile.

Silas shut the fridge in frustration and poked his head back out, and this time he stayed in the doorway. His father was slumped in the middle of their old, beat-up sofa, as always. Silas wasn't sure if it was beige, or had only turned that color over time, darkening from white. Boring news flickered across the TV, muted in the background, while his father worked on his laptop.

Or rather *pretended* to work.

Dad sipped an energy drink with a scary name in bold fluorescent lettering—the kind of drink forbidden to Silas, or it would stunt his growth, his mother had warned.

His father seemed to have grown older more in the last few months than in the whole time Silas had been alive. White had seeped into his brown hair, while his hairline had receded on both sides. Despite the obvious signs of aging, his father still had a friendly, youthful face and wide, easygoing smile that made him look perpetually like a kid.

As usual, he was dressed in a gray suit and red tie paired with a pale blue button-down shirt, as if he was going into the office, but the truth was far different. For all it mattered, he could've stayed in pj's all day. Silas took in the familiar scene, feeling dragged down.

Silas spoke loudly. "I said it's still morning."

"Ha, sure," Dad said. "Early bird gets the worm."

"Ew, who wants worms?" Silas said, again wondering why adults said the weirdest things. "Later birds get the...Cap'n Crunch," he joked back.

Dad laughed, but then another bout of high-pitched shrieks tore through the house, making them both wince and look upstairs. "That kid's got a set of lungs that could wake the dead," Dad said with a chuckle.

Silas wasn't sure how his dad could joke about that racket, nor did he understand how someone so tiny, who barely weighed ten pounds, could generate that level of noise.

It was a total mystery.

He must be a demon, Silas thought, sent to torture me.

But he didn't dare mention that theory to his father, who doted on the little menace. "Forget zombies...he could summon aliens from a galaxy far, far away."

"Yup, with those pipes, we should sign him up for *America's Got Talent*."

“Ugh, Dad...like nobody watches that dumb show anymore,” Silas said, feeling more moody than normal...which was saying a lot. “Though I have to admit, it would be fun to see him terrorize the audience and get voted off immediately.”

“You sound like an angry cat on helium,” Dad said in a bad British accent, imitating the show’s famous host. “Go back to your alley. That’s the only place you’re fit to sing.”

They both laughed.

It felt like...well...a few months ago, before all the terrible things happened. Silas waited for his father to offer to make breakfast, but he went back to tapping on his computer.

“Uh, want some cereal?” Silas asked, trying to prod him. “We could eat together...you know...like old times...”

The words dried up like sand in his throat. It took his dad a long moment to respond. He was too distracted, as usual.

“Nah, Son, I’m good. But you help yourself.”

Silas felt his heart sink.

He returned to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of watery OJ and a bowl of off-brand cereal, the kind with cartoons that looked sort of like the name-brand ones, and flakes that tasted more like chemicals and didn’t even have sugary raisins or colorful marshmallows.

This one was called First Mate Crisp.

It was a knock-off of his favorite cereal, with a terrible cartoon drawing. He missed when they could buy the real stuff, but everything had changed....

For the worse, he thought glumly.

Silas sat down at the kitchen bar, spooning up the soggy puffs that dissolved as soon as they hit milk, and thinking back, trying to pinpoint where everything in his life started to go wrong. It had all begun a few months ago when his dad lost his job. He’d worked for a corporate cruise line in Orlando, helping people book family vacations, and he loved going to work.

But people weren’t going on cruises as much anymore, Dad had explained before it happened. That was why a few months later his company downsized...and let him go.

Silas found it curious how grown-ups made losing your job sound nicer than it really was. He stared at the cereal, now shapeless and dissolved in

his bowl.

Ever since then, Dad sounded deflated, like somebody had sucked all the *fun dad* out of him and left only the *serious dad*.

Silas missed when they would joke around and wrestle on the sofa before school. Sometimes, like this morning, he caught glimmers of Fun Dad, but it would quickly vanish again.

Dad still woke up every day *as if* he had to go to work. He got dressed in a suit and tie, then sat on the sofa with his phone, making calls and searching for a new job. The cushions had worn down from his constant presence, sinking in on themselves.

He did a lot of sitting these days.

Silas would pass him on his way out the door to school. Dad wouldn't even look up, like he used to back when he had a job. At best, Silas would get a halfhearted wave and a mumbled "Have a good day at school, Son."

It made his heart sink every single day. Then, something even more terrible had happened (though Silas couldn't let anyone hear him call it that). The worst thing that had ever happened to him...

His baby brother was born.

As if George could read his mind—or maybe had been summoned like a demon in those scary movies Silas watched at Jose’s house—he released another torrent of cries through the house.

“Wahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.”

Silas remembered feeling nervous and excited when his father took him to the hospital to meet his brother for the first time, a jittery and unsettling brew of emotions. His parents had told him that having a little brother would be “the best thing that ever happened to him.”

He had really been looking forward to it.

Boy, did grown-ups lie.

Silas had approached his mother, who lay back in the bed. She looked worn out and older and maybe a bit shrunken, but also serene and blissful. Her long, dark hair tumbled over her shoulders in thick, shiny curls. Her eyes shone like light brown stars, bright and full of life. The sight of his mother calmed Silas immediately, at least enough to approach the hospital bed.

Mom held the baby cradled in her arms. He peered down at the red-faced, squalling bundle wrapped in a white-and-blue blanket in his mom's arms and thought...

That's him?

His tiny size, his wrinkled old-man face, and his weak screeches made Silas pull away. That couldn't be his baby brother. He looked more like a tiny, angry alien.

"Come on, don't you wanna hold him?" Mom coaxed.

She held out the fussing creature to Silas. The baby was wrapped in the blanket with a tiny blue cap on his head. Dark curls escaped from under it. Yup, he was born with a full head of hair...more proof he might be alien in origin.

Weren't all babies born bald...like in the commercials?

The moment he held his baby brother in his arms and realized how fragile and weak he was, Silas knew that nothing would ever be the same again. He could feel it deep in his bones.

And not in a good way.

Back at home, Mom settled into their bed, and if felt like she almost never left anymore. She stayed there in the dark room with the thick curtains drawn against the sunlight and the sound machine whirring day and night—though it did little to block out the baby's shrieking, which also went on day and night—giving all her love and attention, which used to be reserved for Silas, to George. His heart twisted with envy and jealousy, a vile but also unavoidable concoction.

"Growing a baby and feeding him takes a lot of work," Mom said, the one time when he dared to complain about it. "Silas, you're a big kid now. You're twelve years old. You don't need me like your baby brother does. He's tiny and helpless. You can take care of yourself now."

The problem was Silas did need his mother still.

Or so he thought. He had one great fear that had haunted him basically his entire life. *I'm a coward*, he thought. Though he tried to hide it, every little thing made him jump and want to run away.

Creepy, crawly spiders that lurked in corners.

Dark basements with creaky stairs.

Spooky movies, which Jose and Tamara loved, even the forbidden R-rated ones that secretly terrified them all.

Silas tried to hide his fear and act brave so nobody would find out, but his heart would race and his mouth would go dry, and he'd find any excuse to sneak out of there...fast.

Don't even get him started on cemeteries (how could people live near them, or walk past them like dead people being buried in the ground under their feet wasn't totally creepy?).

Cemeteries. Ugh.

They were definitely at the top of his freaky list.

Even though he stuffed his fear down and hid it, it ate away at him anyway. He was always looking for ways to pretend he was brave, even though he knew it wasn't the truth. That was part of why he loved Tarzan and all the adventures in his books. He hoped that if he read about enough of them, he could become like him.

Brave.

Silas slurped up most of his soggy cereal milk and put his bowl in the dishwasher after rinsing it, knowing he had to do his own dishes now. No one else was going to do them. The milk ran down the sink, turning paler and vanishing.

Then he trudged back up the stairs. The house had filled eerily with quiet...almost too quiet. Feeling a jolt of fear, he peeked into his parents' bedroom. It was dark and smelled stuffy, like plastic, antiseptic, sour milk, and something strange and sweet.

George had stopped crying...finally.

Silas immediately saw why—the baby was affixed to his mother's chest, seemingly sucking the life out of her. Mom's head lolled back as she dozed off while the baby fed on her.

It was like that *Alien* movie.

That freaked Silas out. Quietly, he shut the door, and he released the handle with a barely audible click. He knew better than to wake her when she seldom got sleep anymore.

Or worse, wake the baby.

He returned to his bedroom, in search of the only thing that made him feel better. Well, aside from his best friends.

Books.

When he was reading, he felt brave, but when he closed the book he went back to Scaredy-Cat Silas.

His parents were one of the only other things that could make him feel safe and less afraid. But now they had other things to focus on and worry about, and none of them was him.

He missed the days when his parents doted on him and acted excited at every little thing he said or did. Now, he thought, he could keel over and play dead in front of them, and they'd walk right past him. But if George so much as burped or sneezed, Mom and Dad acted like it was the single greatest thing ever. The kid didn't even smile yet or have any sort of personality.

Silas wanted to say, *Hey, look at me! I'm right here...and I can talk and skateboard and do all kinds of cool stuff!*

But Silas couldn't say any of this.

His parents wouldn't understand. And neither would his friends Tamara and Jose. They loved their little brothers, Jimmy, Ronald, and Benny. They played together all the time. Silas also liked them despite their age differences. They all ran around the local playgrounds and backyards together, wrestling and kicking the soccer ball, and sometimes tossing rocks into the canals.

But George wasn't like those other little brothers. He was tiny and helpless, and as each day passed, Silas was more and more positive that he was probably an alien sent to abduct his parents and steal all their attention. However, Silas would need to gather more proof before he could alert the proper authorities.

But on top of that, the baby wasn't the only terrible thing that had happened. His summer plans had also been ruined.

His aunt Scarlett ran a summer camp in Arizona called Camp Pride Rock. Silas pulled out the postcard she'd sent him on his last birthday. It was from the camp, with pictures of desert bluffs, wild animals like zebras, elephants, hyenas, and lions painted on the walls, and a cheerful sign that said WELCOME TO CAMP PRIDE ROCK.

Under that was printed the camp's slogan, HAKUNA MATATA. He didn't know what that meant, just that it sounded cheerful, welcoming, and adventurous.

From what Silas knew, attending the summer camp was like going on a mini safari trip in the desert. At one time, the camp even boasted zebras, monkeys, meerkats, and real lions in captivity. They had all been rescued. But those days were apparently long gone.

Dad had a photo album with old pictures, the kind that got developed and didn't come from a phone or a computer. They were old and yellowing,

but they depicted Silas's aunt in a khaki button-up shirt, shorts, and a funny-looking hat, like the Crocodile Hunter wore on TV.

The campers stayed in little thatched huts and went on wilderness expeditions. It looked exciting and adventurous, like the thrilling stories in his favorite books.

Silas had always dreamed of getting old enough to become a camper, ideally bringing Jose and Tamara along with him. So that spring, his dad called his sister Scarlett and told her that Silas wanted to attend Camp Pride Rock. She had been thrilled at the news and agreed. She promised to mail them all the materials so that Silas could enroll as an official camper. With the new baby, it would be good for everyone and give Silas a chance to learn and grow.

At the time, Silas had thought that it was the best thing that had ever happened to him. But then the packet of materials from Camp Pride Rock never arrived. He checked the mailbox every day with his heart pounding in excitement. Dad tried calling his sister, but she didn't call back.

Days passed. Then weeks.

Then two months.

"That's strange," Dad said, then shrugged. "Maybe your aunt's busy? I know she's had a lot on her mind lately. And, well, with everything going on between losing my job and the new baby, I haven't been the best at keeping in touch. I'm sure she'll call back soon."

But she never did.

A few weeks later, the notice of her death arrived by courier out of the blue. Dad was shocked, then saddened, then angry that nobody was telling him anything about what happened.

Was it a heart attack? Stroke? Car accident?

Silas heard him yelling at lawyers into the phone.

That had been two months ago.

No camp. No adventures. Just a summer of reading books...and trying to ignore his brother's constant squalling. He needed to get earplugs or maybe stuff his ears with cotton.

The doorbell rang.

That set off a new bout of crying. Silas darted to his window. Two people in suits and dark sunglasses stood outside. They looked important, like federal agents. His heart leapt for joy...the authorities were finally coming to retrieve his alien brother and return him to space.

Silas dashed down the steps, fully preparing to lead them straight to George. He thrust open the front door, then started back at their serious expressions. They frowned at him.

“Young man, is your father home?” the woman asked.

The man added helpfully, “It’s about your aunt Scarlett.”



“We need to speak with your father,” the woman said.

The statement was simple enough, but Silas froze with fright. He felt his fear rise up inside him. His mouth wouldn’t move or make sounds. It was as if he was paralyzed.

Who were these strange people? And what did they have to do with his dead aunt?

He couldn’t move, let alone speak. He stared at them in terror.

A hand grabbed his shoulder.

Silas nearly jumped out of his skin, adrenaline shooting through him and reanimating his limbs. As if hit by a bolt of lightning, he sprang into action and whipped around—

But it was only Dad.

“Yes, I’m Mr. Reyes.”

He greeted the two of them, then took over, waving Silas back into the house and shutting the door behind him. Silas could hear the muffled exchange, but couldn’t make out any words.

What did they want? Were they explaining what had happened to his aunt?

A million terrible scenarios shot through his head, from car crashes to incurable mutant viruses, to strange visitors from another dimension (his brother was proof that it happened a lot more than people thought), to alien abductions (you could never rule those out).

Finally, after a few minutes—which felt more like an eternity—Dad reappeared holding a new sort of letter...this one in a large manila envelope. The seal hadn't been torn open.

"Your aunt Scarlett's will," Dad explained. "Those were her lawyers."

Silas knew that was how people decided who got their stuff after they passed away, another thought that sent fear rocketing through him. He didn't want her old things.

How creepy.

When Dad opened the envelope, tearing open the seal, and read the will, he went from grief stricken...to surprised...to confused...to downright excited.

"This is it!" he exclaimed. "I'm still saddened by her passing, but your aunt didn't want to leave us with nothing. Her will might be exactly what our family needs right now."

"Dad...are you okay?" Silas asked, feeling worried about his father's mental state. Lately, since losing his job and now his sister's death, he'd been all over the place, crying one minute, then on his knees praying the next, then back to optimistic and joking around.

Dad glanced up with a wild look in his eyes. "Okay? I'm more than okay!" he said, waving Aunt Scarlett's will around. "Son, don't you see? This is the answer to all our prayers. The overdue bills. The mortgage payments. The job hunt."

Silas frowned. "What do you mean?"

Of course, he knew that his parents had some money troubles. He knew about the pile of bills stacked high on the kitchen table. He had seen their angry red warnings that read *past due* and *foreclosure warning* and *collections*.

But he didn't understand how a letter from Aunt Scarlett solved all their problems.

"No more hurricanes, either," Dad went on. "No more humidity. Dry air and clear skies for miles."

Dad grabbed him and hoisted him onto his shoulders, parading him around the living room, just like old times before he lost his job.

Silas's heart leapt—Fun Dad was back!

Though he didn't understand why exactly...adults could make no sense, he'd learned.

They skipped around the room like that.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

And then—

“Wahhhhhhhhhhhh.”

They'd woken the baby. Dad froze, and so did Silas. They both knew that was a very bad thing.

A few seconds later the crying hushed, but Mom tramped down the stairs, finally awake though not fully alert. Not a good sign.

She furrowed her brow in annoyance.

“What's all the racket?” she asked sleepily, clutching George, who was feeding, to her chest.

He was always sucking milk from her.

“We're moving to Arizona,” Dad said, tipping over and dumping Silas onto the sofa.

“What do you mean we're moving?” Mom asked, placing the baby over her shoulder and patting him on the back. She echoed Silas's shock and confusion. “To Arizona? Of all the crazy ideas. Ricardo Reyes, are you serious?”

Now she sounded near the end of her wits (though Silas wasn't sure what *wits* were exactly). And she'd used his father's full name.

Another bad sign.

“But, Dad, this is our home,” Silas added in a soft voice, tugging at his dad's sleeve.

“Margarita, hear me out before you jump to conclusions,” Dad said, taking her hand and gently rubbing George's back. “This is the answer to all our prayers—and a fresh start for the family.”

Dad waved the will at her like a white flag of surrender, then started talking fast, before she could get more annoyed or say no.

“Scarlett's lawyers came by to deliver her will,” he said. “My sister left Camp Pride Rock to me...well...us,” he backpedaled. “And don't you see? The camp is the solution to our problems.”

“She left us the camp?” Mom said, cooing to George as she rocked side to side, lest he scrunch his face up like an old man and break out in another crying fit. It was like she was dancing, too, but in a different, far less joyous way.

Dad sank into the sofa next to Silas. And that was when he explained his crazy idea.

“Right, we can move to the camp and fix it up, then reopen it for campers next summer,” Dad said, sounding more excited as he went. “We can’t afford this house anymore, and I need a job. Best thing is to sell it. We can live at the camp in Scarlett’s old cabin while we work on it, and then run it.”

“You really mean it...move to Arizona?” Mom said, sounding unsure. It was how Silas felt.

Dad went over and took Mom’s hand. “Apparently, it needs a bit of work. But nothing a little elbow grease can’t fix. My experience in the cruise industry should translate perfectly to running a summer camp for kids. It’s the same thing...like a cruise adventure in the desert.”

“You’re sure about this?” Mom said, patting George on the back and peering at his face. He burped, making both parents chuckle and coo at him.

Since when was burping cute?

If Silas did that in front of everyone, he would be chastised for not having manners, not praised.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Dad said right away. “Margarita, think about it. Arizona is nice and warm, but without the humidity. It’ll be the perfect place for raising our boys. Get them out of the crowded city. Less pollution. This is the best decision for our family. And, well...”

“Yes?” Mom said.

Tears sprang to his eyes.

“It’s what my sister would have wanted,” he said, emotion swelling in his voice. He rubbed George’s back tenderly. “That camp was like her baby. She didn’t want us to sell it. It’s her dying wish. She wants it to stay in the family. That’s what her will says.”

He handed the legal papers over to Mom while Silas sat on the sofa, feeling like he barely existed anymore. He wished his mother would look at him the same way she did the baby. He hated how he felt like a fifth wheel in his own family now.

His parents kept talking until the sun set, when they finally came to a decision and ordered pizza to celebrate. They were moving; it was settled. Silas loved pizza, but it tasted greasy and stale in his mouth. His heart felt heavy, making his whole body sag. He gazed around their cozy little house. They were eating on the sofa in front of the TV again.

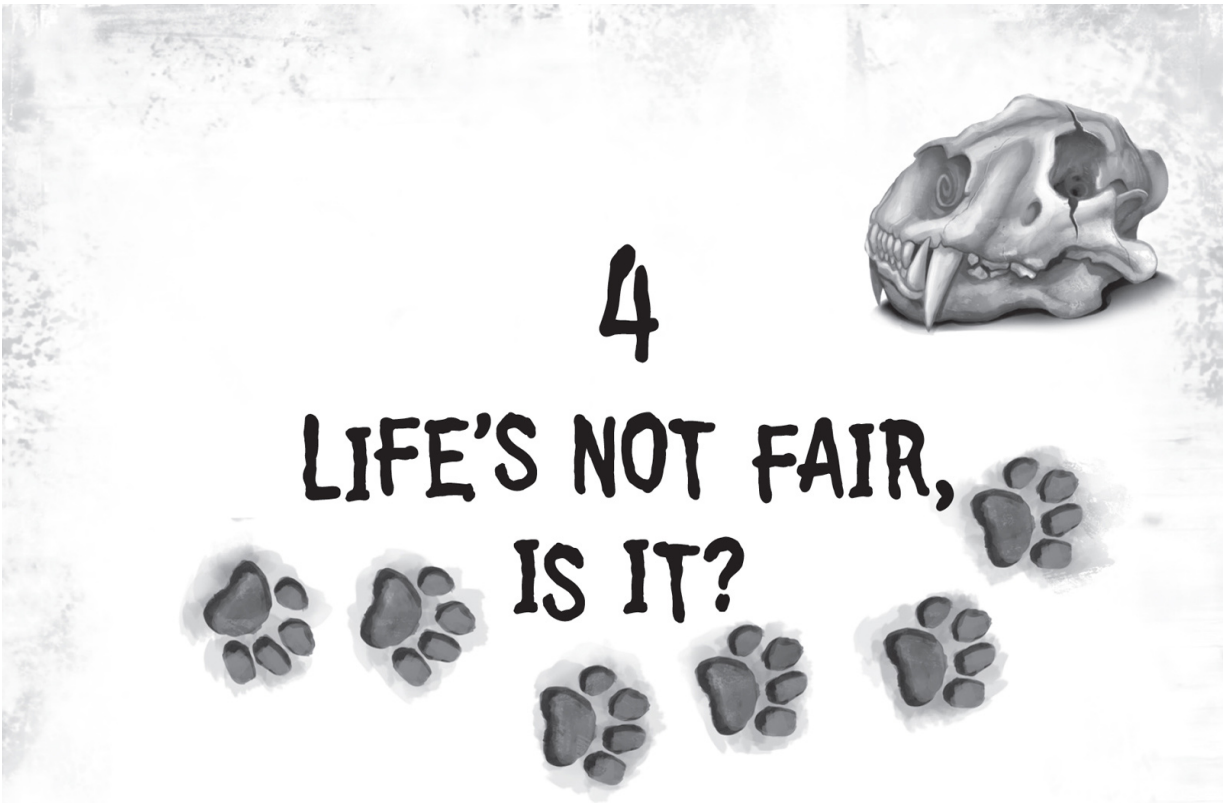
They used to eat as a family at the dinner table, but it was covered in bills now, and since George came along, Mom preferred to plop him on the sofa cushions, where she could keep him next to her. That was, when they still ate dinner together, which was a rare occasion these days.

Silas watched in dismay while his parents continued talking and worked out all the details. He had expected his mother to shoot down the plan. His dad often got excited about crazy ideas, but Mom would always bring him back down to planet Earth.

But not this time.

She actually seemed to be coming around to it—liking it, even. This couldn't be happening. Dread seeped through his body, making his mouth turn sour and dry. He set his pizza down. His father wasn't making any sense. It had to be a trick. Silas felt his stomach flip.

They were moving to Arizona?



“**A**rizona?” Silas said. “Like all the way across the country? You’re sure about this?”

His parents looked over in concern. Silas had been keeping quiet, but he couldn’t help blurting that out. Why weren’t they asking what he wanted?

“You wanted to go to Camp Pride Rock this summer, remember?” Dad said, nudging his shoulder. “Well, this way you get to be a camper all year round. Doesn’t that sound amazing?”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that.”

Silas had to admit that did sound pretty cool. He felt more excited as his father kept talking. Dad made it sound like they were going on the best and most fun vacation of all time. He was good at selling vacations. After all, that had been his job.

Dad also said that it was perfect timing, which was a sign from the universe. It was summer break, so Silas could spend the summer helping his father fix up the camp, then start a new school in the fall. Then Dad’s eyes lit up with another idea.

“Oh, or maybe we could try homeschooling,” Dad said. “What better learning environment? It’s like the School of the World.”

“Wow, that could be pretty fun,” Silas said, and Mom nodded. But then his face fell.

“What is it, Son?” Dad asked.

“But what about my friends?”

Dad exchanged a look with Mom. “Right, they can come visit and even be campers next summer,” Dad said. “You’ll all have a blast together.”

“And don’t forget about your smartphone,” Mom added, patting the device on the sofa. It lit up with texts from his friends and social media alerts. “It’s so easy to stay in touch these days. Not like when we were kids. We basically lived in the Dark Ages.”

His parents chuckled at that.

For a moment, it felt like old times again. Silas realized that he would do anything to keep the jubilant smile on his dad’s face, even if it meant sacrificing his home and leaving everything he knew and loved behind.

Mom seemed to feel the same way. It was clear from how she snuggled up to Dad on the sofa now. George...well, he couldn’t talk yet, so he didn’t exactly get a say in the matter.

It was official. The Reyes family was moving.

Camp Pride Rock, here we come.

“To new beginnings,” Dad said, raising his cup filled with diet cola to toast them. Mom bounced the baby and raised her cup. “To the Reyes family and our new home.”

“And to our beloved Scarlett,” Mom added. “She left our family far too soon.”

“To Scarlett,” Dad repeated.

They toasted with their soda cups.

Silas toasted them back—but then the familiar dread seeped in, replacing his excitement. Usually he’d be thrilled to be allowed a small cup of cola this late at night, but he could barely drink the syrupy liquid. It had gone flat in his cup. He set it aside, feeling queasy.

Silas had never lived anywhere else. This was their home. He loved his middle school, and seventh grade was coming up this fall. Not to mention Jose and Tamara, his best friends. He couldn’t imagine not riding the bus with them every morning, or playing together at the skate park after school.

But he knew better than to complain. Dad did need a job. The bills were piling up faster than his dirty laundry. And it wasn't like his parents listened or paid much attention to him anyway, not since his little brother entered this world.

After helping his mom clean up the pizza, he trudged up to bed, feeling even more morose than when those people in black showed up and Dad first announced his crazy plan. He had thought his life couldn't get any worse, but wow, was he wrong. He climbed into bed, yanked the covers over his head, and pulled out his phone. He thumbed to the messaging app.

He sent an emergency group text to his friends to meet up.

Meet at the park. Code RED. See u tomorrow.

Then he fell into a restless slumber filled with broken dreams about lions and falling off cliffs, which was pretty much how his life felt at the moment: like he was tumbling into a dark abyss with no bottom.

* * *

The next morning, Silas woke more tired than when he went to sleep, thanks to more terrible nightmares that seized him as soon as he shut his eyes and tormented him all night. But this time the culprit wasn't his books. It was his family's decision to move to Arizona.

In the kitchen he scarfed down some generic cereal while George wailed in the background and Dad made phone calls to real estate agents. Then he rode his board over to the skate park a few blocks from their cul-de-sac.

Their quiet neighborhood whirled past him, each suburban house and gentle curve in the road as familiar as his own face. The streets were smooth and wide, and the houses painted shades of pastel, with sprinklers churning over yards. It was early, but the temperature was already climbing. Florida seemed to ignore any seasonal changes and had one setting: hot and humid.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. Worries swirled through his head. He couldn't believe in a few short weeks they'd be packing up and moving across the country to Arizona. He'd never even been out of this state, let alone so far away.

He needed to talk to his friends and get their advice. They had always been there for him. If anyone could help him deal with this impending life trauma, it was Tamara and Jose. And leaving them was the worst part of the whole awful situation. He dreaded having to tell them the news.

Silas leaned on his board, cutting right, and arrived at the park. With one smooth kick, he tipped his board up into his hand and hurried across to their spot under a shady palm tree. He plopped down on the ground.

Because school was out, the park was packed with kids of all ages skating around the sunken concrete ramps, doing jumps and attempting tricks—and often falling. Silas had bit it more than a few times, and he had the scrapes and bruises to prove it. This was their favorite spot to hang. He let sand sift through his fingers and waited for them to arrive so he could brief them on the gory details of his life.

A few minutes later, Jose and Tamara arrived in tandem, skating up together, then kicking up their boards and strolling across the park toward him.

They waved at a few familiar skaters, then dropped down in the shade next to him, stowing their boards. Silas felt a pang of regret seeing their boards—all three of them, decorated with stickers and custom paint jobs that they'd cobbled together over the years—stacked together like that. This could be one of the last times that ever happened.

"What's the emergency?" Jose said. "Code Red...it better be serious."

"Yeah, spit it out," Tamara added, cocking her eyebrow. "I've been in total suspense like all morning."

"Remember how I said my life couldn't get any worse?" Silas said.

"Always so dramatic. You gotta lighten up," Jose said, throwing his arms up. "The sun is shining. Sky's blue. We're at the skate park. Seriously, what could be that terrible?"

"Yeah, it's summer vacation," Tamara said. "The best time of the year, because—"

"*No school*," they chorused together.

That made Silas crack a smile. They always cheered him up.

He was going to miss his friends.

"First of all, I love school," Silas said. "I'm not thrilled it's summer."

"Ugh, such a nerd," Jose said with a roll of his eyes, but he meant it affectionately.

“Yup, always got your nose in a book,” Tamara said. “But your life can’t be all work and no play. Then you’ll end up like my parents. Trust me, that is no bueno.”

“Plus, we always have the best time together,” Jose said. “Remember last summer? It was epic. Video games. Skating. Pizza parties. Beach hangs. Spooky movies. Like, why wait for October? And this summer is gonna be even more epic. Am I right?”

“Yeah, it was pretty epic,” Silas said, smiling at the memory, but then he turned more serious.

“So why the Code Red?” Tamara asked.

“Yeah, what could be so bad?” Jose added.

They both peered at him.

“Right, remember how my aunt died a few weeks ago?” he said. “The one who had the camp in Arizona that I wanted to go to this summer?”

They nodded. “Of course,” Tamara said.

“We’re so sorry,” Jose added.

“Well, turns out she left the camp to my dad,” Silas went on. “And he’s decided that we’re going to move there...permanently.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Tamara said. “Your family is moving to Arizona?”

“To live at a camp?” Jose said.

They both looked shocked.

Silas nodded, looking down. “You know my dad lost his job. He figures he can fix up the camp and run it, and we can live there, too. I don’t exactly have a choice. I have to go with them....”

He trailed off. The words felt heavy in his mouth. Tears pricked his eyes. Even Jose, always the optimist, couldn’t put a positive spin on it.

“Okay, fine, it got worse,” Jose said. “You’re right. But we’re your friends no matter what.”

“Yup, we’ll visit you.” Tamara held up her phone. “And we can text your ear off....”

“The point is even if you move to Mars, you can’t get rid of us that easily,” Jose said.

That made Silas feel slightly better. “Yeah, and my dad says maybe you all can visit and come to Camp Pride Rock next summer.”

“That would be amazing,” Jose said. “I’ve never been anywhere except Miami. But that doesn’t count.”

“Yeah, a total blast,” Tamara chimed in. “You made the camp sound so cool.”

“Well, the camp is pretty cool,” Silas said, and went on describing all the fun activities and details about Camp Pride Rock, based on Dad’s photo album and Aunt Scarlett’s postcards.

The conversation turned more optimistic, with Jose spinning ideas for crazy adventures that Silas could have at the camp, and Tamara growing envious that she couldn’t move to Arizona, too. “You’re going to have the best summer...without us,” she pouted.

“Don’t be afraid,” Jose said. “New adventures can be fun. Heck, I wish I could do something exciting like move to another state, let alone to a wilderness camp in the desert.”

But that was the problem. As always, Silas was afraid of all the unknown adventures. Despite his friends’ happy banter and the warm sunshine on his back, he couldn’t shake the bad feeling that made his stomach churn and goose bumps rise on the back of his neck.

Something bad was about to happen.



Less than three weeks later, Silas and his family were on the road in their minivan, bound for their new home in Arizona. The car was packed to the brim.

Silas claimed the whole *back-backseat*, while Mom and George rode in the pilot seats in the second row and Dad took the wheel. The landscape blurred past their windows, turning from lush and tropical, to flat and spartan once they passed East Texas, to arid desert as they hit the Southwest.

They'd sold their house (or more like given it back to the bank...he'd heard his parents whispering about it) and their other car, a beat-up Honda that barely ran anyway. They'd sold some of their stuff, donated what was left to their church, and packed up the remaining essentials.

Silas had one last skate park meet-up with his friends. He'd had to choke back tears and hide his fear about his whole life turning upside down.

"Goodbye, Orlando," Silas whispered under his breath as they pulled out of their driveway for the very last time, bound for the unknown.

They'd been driving for four long days now. His dad tried to make it fun, but Silas couldn't shake that ominous feeling that something bad was about to happen. To pass the time, he played dumb games on his phone, the kind that hooked you but got boring fast; read his adventure books, trying to find that spark of excitement that seemed to have been extinguished when he said goodbye to his friends; and tried to block out his brother's cries.

Inside the van, they were...

Excruciating.

He was surprised his ears didn't explode, like in that alien invasion movie where humans defeated the aliens using high-frequency sounds. It was one of Jose's all-time favorites.

Finally, they were almost at their new home. They pulled off the highway, turning down a two-lane road that quickly became one lane, and then gravel, which rocked under the tires and cast off dust behind them. The farther they got from civilization, the more worried Silas became.

Tumbleweeds rolled down the road. He couldn't believe his eyes. He'd thought those only existed in Western movies. The sky was too big and too wide, and turned strange colors at dusk, like somebody had painted it. Arizona may as well have been Mars, he thought, it was so alien and different from Florida. Silas shrank back. He missed home already.

The longer they drove, the more desolate and empty the desert became, save for a few run-down trailers lodged in the sand, which seemed to be trying to swallow them back up.

This was it?

In Florida, they could drive for miles and miles and still be surrounded by people, cars, houses, highways, restaurants, and businesses. But out here, there was nothing. Not even a fast-food restaurant or grocery store in sight. Silas had a bad feeling about...well...all of it.

He wished that this was a terrible movie that he could hit stop on, or better yet, rewind and go back to the very beginning, maybe even before George was born and his dad lost his job.

But real life didn't work that way.

"Hang on, we're almost there," Dad said, sounding hopeful but weary. He'd done all the driving, while Mom tended to George. The GPS on his phone lit up with their destination. "One last pit stop for gas—and then Camp Pride Rock, here we come."

They pulled into what was supposed to be the local town, but it didn't even have a single stoplight. The gas station was full service, which meant you had to let them put the gas in for you. Worse yet, the pumps were so old, they were manual and didn't take credit cards.

This place definitely looked like something out of one of Jose's favorite spooky movies. Silas got a creepy feeling right away, as his scaredy-cat fear rose up inside him.

As soon as they jerked to a halt, kicking up sand and dust, Mom bolted for the bathroom. It was a unisex one located behind the gas station.

The place looked deserted. Was anyone there?

But then—

The bell jangled as the gas station attendant wandered out of the shop. She wore coveralls, stained black with grease, and a cowboy hat. She spat in the dust.

"What'll it be, sir?" she asked Dad, leaning against the window.

"Uh, regular," Dad said, not used to having somebody get his gas for him.

She hooked it up and started pumping it, then came back to the front to wash the windows with dirty water. She looked closely at Dad, then pulled back with a start.

"Well, well...the long-lost brother returns," she said. Her eyes narrowed, then darted to the back, where Silas sat behind the baby seat.

"Uh, what do you mean?" Dad said, taken aback.

"Ha, you're the spitting image of ole Scarlett, rest her soul. You must be her brother."

Her face hardened when she said that last part, almost like she wasn't pleased with their arrival in town. Silas watched her closely, feeling more unsettled with each second that passed.

"Guilty as charged," Dad said. He chuckled, but she remained deadly serious.

Her face was lined and sun-browned, while her wiry hair was tied back with a leather string. She had a chunky turquoise-and-silver necklace strung around her neck.

"I'm Billie Jean...guess Ma was a fan of that musician. He had a song. It was her favorite. Played it all through her pregnancy. But folks round here call me Billie."

"Nice to meet you," Dad said. "Ricardo Reyes."

Billie glanced at Silas. “And that must be the little prince. Excited to visit Pride Rock?”

Silas shrank back from her gaze.

“Uh, sure,” he mumbled. His voice seemed to have deserted him, which usually happened when he was afraid. His friends often joked that when that happened, the “cat got his tongue.”

Billie nodded, then spat in the dirt again.

“Such a shame. I miss that old bird. She was one of a kind. Bit eccentric, I’d say. Had a parrot named something silly and a walking stick. Never saw her without them.”

“Ha, that sounds like my sister. We’re taking over the camp,” Dad explained. “She left it to me in her will. We’re gonna fix it up and hopefully reopen it for campers next summer.”

Billie frowned at that news, but then—

Snap.

The pump clicked off.

After she unhitched the nozzle and replaced the gas cap, Billie returned to the front window with a strange look on her face. She squinted at the high bluff that towered over the minuscule town. The sun was starting to set behind it, casting the whole valley into deep shadow.

“Bad things happen to folks who live up there,” she said.

Those words hit Silas hard, and he flinched deeper into his seat.

What did she mean by that?

Dad also looked taken aback. “Are you talking about what happened to my sister?”

“Just you and your family be careful, that’s all.”

Then she took Dad’s money and headed back inside with a noticeable hitch in her gait. A gust of wind blew sand at their old minivan. Dad cranked the window up, but not fast enough. Silas was able to taste grit on his tongue.

* * *

“What do you mean bad things?” Mom asked when she rejoined them in the car.

“No clue,” Dad said. “It was...strange.”

“Think she was talking about Scarlett?” Mom pressed. Worry strained at her voice, making it waver. “We still don’t know what happened to her.”

Dad shot her a warning look.

“Her lawyers were clear that it was a terrible accident. Nothing more.”

But that was the first Silas had heard of that. *An accident?*

He perked up, listening closely. He’d assumed his aunt died the way... well...a lot of older people did. From a heart attack, or something like that. But an accident?

Billie’s words flashed through his head again.

Bad things happen to folks who live up there.

“Fine, but then what did she mean?” Mom said. She sounded concerned. George fussed softly next to her. She reached over, tucked in his blanket, and patted him gently.

Again, Silas wished she’d tend to him. But he wasn’t a baby, so he couldn’t compete.

“Ricardo, you’re avoiding the question,” Mom said when Dad didn’t answer right away. He didn’t like anything that interfered with, or put a damper on, his exciting plans.

Dad shook his head. “Look, she’s a local...and Pride Rock is a small town. I’m guessing she’s probably not used to outsiders moving in, that’s all.”

* * *

The camp was a good forty-minute drive from the gas station, winding up the mesas and bluffs, which sported steep drop-offs. If Silas thought the town was in the middle of nowhere—then this was the end of nowhere. That bad feeling pooled larger in his stomach, making it churn.

It got worse the farther they drove. The gravel road hadn’t started off well maintained, and now it didn’t seem maintained at all. Their minivan wasn’t made for off-roading. It slipped and lurched into ruts, making Silas bounce around, held in place only by his seatbelt.

Meanwhile, George had a cozy, cushioned car seat next to his mom and didn’t seem to mind. Plus, she tended to his every need.

Life isn’t fair.

Silas crossed his arms and tried to keep still and not get carsick. But the more they jostled and jerked up the dirt road—if it could be considered a

road at all—the more nauseated he felt.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, and right as the sun was setting and casting them into darkness, they pulled up to the entrance to the camp. Silas recognized it from the pictures.

CAMP PRIDE ROCK

Only unlike the old pictures, the sign was run-down and falling apart. The “Rock” part was hanging halfway off the wooden post. The letters were also tarnished, beaten by wind and sand and dirt, and badly faded by the sun, making them nearly impossible to read.

HAKUNA MATATA...NO WORRIES was under that, the camp’s slogan.

No worries seemed the total opposite of what they should be doing. Beyond the sign, he could just make out the camp, which looked equally run-down. The road through the grounds was even more pockmarked and poorly maintained.

“Welcome to your new home,” Dad proclaimed, excitement lighting up his eyes.

Mom patted George and cooed at him. “Your new home, buddy. Isn’t that exciting?”

He burped and spat white goo in response. She beamed at him. The baby couldn’t really even smile yet. Why did she think he was the cutest thing in the world?

Silas felt like he was in an alternate universe and experiencing a totally different reality than the rest of his family. Bile singed his throat. He swallowed it back down. His heart raced, and he tried to still it, but it disobeyed, pumping fear and adrenaline through his veins.

He stared at the sign and derelict road and campgrounds in horror and thought—

This was their new home?



“Home sweet home...welcome to Camp Pride Rock,” Dad announced in his tour guide voice. He drove their minivan into the camp. Mom reached over and tapped George.

“That’s right...it’s your new home,” she cooed at him. This time, he hiccuped in response. Silas wondered why Mom always repeated herself to his brother.

He felt worse the farther they drove. He’d been expecting to snap fun pics to text to Jose and Tamara, but he lowered his phone in complete horror.

Just like the derelict sign that greeted them, the rest of the camp was equally neglected. It looked nothing like the pictures in the photo album. They must have been taken a long time ago, Silas realized. The paths and roads had been gutted by wind and rain and swallowed up by sand, so it was almost impossible to tell them from the wilderness, which was studded with all manner of dry and prickly vegetation that looked ready to stab or scrape....

Or both.

Silas took in the grounds—called the Pride Lands—as they drove down the gravel road, the wheels kicking up dust and sand. They included an array of buildings, each in need of countless repairs, new roofs, and fresh paint. He spotted the huts where campers stayed. But now most of the thatching was gone, leaving them completely exposed to the elements.

“At least it doesn’t rain much out here,” Dad said in a cheerful voice, always trying to put a bright spin on everything, often in complete defiance of reality.

“But what about dust, sand, rattlesnakes, scorpions, tarantulas...” Silas mumbled back, ticking them off on his fingers. Each worry held a special place on his phobia list.

Dad chuckled. “Guess I’m on bug-killing duty.”

Silas didn’t find that very funny. Tarantulas were near the top of his list, and scorpions weren’t far behind them. He’d read enough nature books to know all about the myriad ways these creatures could maim or kill a person, especially a kid.

He shut his phone off. He couldn’t show this nightmarish place to his friends. He felt shame creep up his neck and tingle his scalp. They wouldn’t understand it. Plus, it was totally embarrassing. He’d talked up how cool the camp was.

This dump was his new home?

They drove farther into the camp as Silas grew more uneasy. Signs were posted everywhere labeling the area, but they were badly faded and hard to read. He had to strain to make out the words. There was a mess hall, and while it needed work, it looked better kept up than the rest of the camp. In the distance, Silas spotted the pens and cages that used to house the rescue animals, but they looked empty and abandoned now. That made him sad.

He had hoped that some still lived here, even if it was just zebras, or maybe an ostrich. But it seemed that as the camp had fallen into disrepair, the rescue animals had fled, too.

There was a small post office next to an infirmary. All the buildings were wood paneled, with thatched roofs made to look like they came straight out of Kenya. That was one of the countries that had popped up on their family’s DNA test, where their ancestors had lived.

The camp also boasted a Hippo Swimming Hole, though it looked murky and pretty dried up. Beyond that, a rickety rope bridge traversed a

deep canyon and led to something called the Elephant Graveyard. That sign pointed across the rope bridge, where rocky hills rose up, blocking the view beyond. Curiosity grabbed at Silas and he strained to see, but the sunlight was already fading and casting the grounds into shadow.

But Silas's interest was piqued.

What in the heck was an elephant graveyard?

His mind whirled with ideas. Were actual elephants buried there? Or was it just something to scare the campers? Either way, he felt goose bumps prick his skin. Cemeteries were on the list of things that most freaked him out.

More signs with arrows pointed to Hyena Hiking Trail and Ostrich Nest Lookout. But it was unclear if the arrows even pointed the right direction anymore. Everything there was falling apart and run-down. Clearly, Aunt Scarlett hadn't kept the camp in good shape.

But why?

"Poor Scarlett," Dad said as they kept driving. "She must have needed more help than she let on. I had no idea. I wish she'd told me, or asked for help...."

Mom reached over and squeezed his hand. "Well, we're here now. This is what your sister would've wanted. That's why she left you the camp. She trusted you, remember?"

They fell silent and didn't elaborate.

Silas had half hoped his parents would decide to turn around and head straight back to Florida upon seeing the state of the camp, making the decision to sell it so everything could return to normal. But no such luck. Despite the horror show the camp had become, Dad wasn't deterred.

"All this place needs is a little elbow grease and hard work, and we'll get it up and running in no time," Dad said. "And you're gonna be my little helper, right?"

He turned to Silas and grinned. Clearly, he was beyond thrilled to devote himself to a new project after all that time sitting around on the sofa.

"Uh, sure," Silas mumbled back, not sharing his enthusiasm.

While that was the last thing he wanted to do, he couldn't stand to ruin his dad's chipper mood. Mom seemed to feel the same way. Even George wasn't fussing for once. He craned his little head around in wonder, taking in the kaleidoscopic colors painted onto the evening sky.

“That’s right,” Dad said. “You and I are gonna have the best summer. Aren’t we?”

“Sure, Dad...the very best.”

The words dried up like sand in his throat.

They reached the parking lot. Dad pulled over, kicking up more dirt off the gravel road. Then they all piled out. Silas coughed and struggled to see through the dust clogging the air.

Something shrill broke the silence.

It sounded like shrieking.

The terrible screaming pierced the sunset, echoing around the mesas. It sounded like more than one voice, too. Silas tensed up in fear. He couldn’t see through the dust and sand, which only made it worse. His heart leapt into his throat as if trying to choke him.



“**W**hat was that?” Silas yelped in fear.

He leapt back, feeling every hair on his body stand on end. The screaming pierced the evening sky, then more shrieks joined the horrifying chorus. They sounded closer now, too.

A warm female voice reached their ears—

“Oh, don’t mind them! Just the screech owls calling to the sun to make it set.”

But Silas still felt afraid. *Just screech owls?*

That didn’t sound good. And clearly, more than one of them lived in these hills. Finally the dust cleared, revealing the speaker. It was a kindly woman with a plump face, golden skin, graying hair tucked back in a tight bun, and almond-shaped eyes. She cracked a grin.

“I’m Sara, the chef for the camp,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron. “Or rather, I used to be...before we closed up shop. And you must be Scarlett’s kinfolk. The lawyers said you’d be coming round any day now.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dad said, holding out his hand. “I’m Ricardo, and this is my wife, Margarita, and these are my little princes...Silas...and baby George.”

Sara went to shake Dad’s hand right as two kids bounded out to the parking lot and attached themselves to her legs, making her stagger back.

Dad chuckled at their antics. “Well, hello there.”

Sara winked. “These two little monsters are mine...Timothy and Natasha.”

“We’re *fraternal* twins,” Timothy said with a toothless grin. He lisped slightly from it.

“Yeah, but I’m older,” Natasha said, displaying that she already had her teeth in.

“By five measly minutes,” Timothy said, shooting her an annoyed look. “Like, big deal. We’re basically exactly the same age. Why you gotta tell everyone that you’re older?”

“*Basically* isn’t *exactly*,” Natasha replied, rolling her eyes. “I’m still older and I’ll always be older, deal with it.”

Silas laughed at the twins. It was the first good laugh he’d had since he left his friends back in Florida. He had a feeling that Jose and Tamara would get along famously with these two kids. That thought made his heart sink slightly—his best friends were so far away.

But then he remembered that his dad had promised they’d be coming to visit by next summer, maybe even as campers. Then they could all become friends and have a blast together.

Suddenly, a large bird flapped its wings and flew straight at them with its talons raised.

Silas ducked back—

Was it a screech owl?

But the twins giggled and stood their ground as the bird alighted on Natasha’s shoulder. “And meet Zazu!” Timothy said. “He’s the last member of our little family.”

“Zazu...arhhh...Zazu!” the bird chirped.

“That’s your...parrot?” Silas said, impressed.

The bird had beautiful feathers in soft shades of gray that tapered to red popping out of his tail. And more, he could talk. Silas had only read about that in books and seen it on TV.

“Yup,” Natasha said. “He’s a Congo African gray parrot. He used to be on exhibit at the camp, but your aunt adopted him. He went with her everywhere, too.”

“Yeah, and he’s super-duper smart,” Timothy added, stroking the bird, who pecked at his hand. “He can talk, though he says some crazy stuff.”

“Arhhh...crazy stuff,” Zazu chirped.

Making them all crack up.

“How old is Zazu?” Silas asked, slipping into his animal detective mode. “I read that some parrots can live over fifty years.”

“That’s right,” Timothy said. “Zazu is over thirty years old. How’d you know that?”

“Yeah, he’s like three times our age,” Natasha said. “Can you believe it?”

“Uh, I like books about animals,” Silas said, worrying they’d think he was a total nerd.

“Oh, us too!” Natasha said. “Wait until we show you the camp library. It has loads of them.”

Silas could feel they were becoming friends already. This cheered him up. Sara and his parents also seemed to be getting along famously. Their gathering drew the attention of the rest of the camp workers, who joined them in the parking lot.

Next, they were joined by the nurse, who ran the infirmary and helped out with other odd jobs.

“Any bumps or bruises, he’s your best bet,” Sara said, introducing him to the group.

“Rafi, at your service,” he said with a wide, bright smile. He was younger than Sara from the looks of him, with dark skin and light eyes.

“How’d you end up at Camp Pride Rock?” Mom asked, giving him a big smile...too big.

Gross, Silas thought.

His mother thought the nurse was attractive. And even if he was...barf.

“Ah yes, I grew up in Kenya, where my mother is from,” Rafi explained. “But then we moved here as kids when she reunited with her old college boyfriend, who was from Arizona. After I graduated from nursing school, I was working at a big hospital down in Phoenix.”

“And you got sick of the city?” Dad said.

“Yup, I wanted a change of scenery, and I’d always hoped to work more with kids,” Rafi said. “Your aunt Scarlett hired me on the spot. I love working with the campers and getting to live out here. It’s the most beautiful place in the world. Well, other than Kenya.”

Silas liked him right away. He surveyed their new camp family, realizing that everyone looked mixed in different ways. It made Silas feel more at home. They resembled his family that way. They were like a multicolored weaving that knotted up and converged in this place.

Then another voice reached their ears, this one more gravelly and more aged.

“Ah, the long-lost brother arrives.”

They all turned to look at the newcomer, a tall man in coveralls, as he smiled a crooked smile and stuck his hand out. “Archibald, but everyone round here calls me Archie.”

He had stringy salt-and-pepper hair tied back in a bun. He wore a straw hat, paired with snakeskin cowboy boots. But that wasn’t what caught Silas’s attention. He clutched a strange sort of walking stick. It was a long wooden staff with several strange gourds tied to it.

Suddenly, the staff *shimmered*.

That spooked Silas. But he blinked, and it went back to normal.

Were the setting sunlight and his eyes playing tricks on him?

But Silas couldn’t shake the strange feeling. He remembered Billie saying something about his aunt having a staff that she took with her everywhere. Did it belong to his aunt?

Before he could worry about it, Zazu flapped his wings and cawed in a funny voice. “*Danger...danger...beware...the arch...keep out!*” They all startled at first. But the twins giggled and hushed him. The parrot calmed down.

“Don’t mind Zazu,” Timothy said. “He’s been more agitated after...you know...”

He trailed off. But Silas did know.

After my aunt died.

The adults didn’t pay much attention to Zazu’s tantrum and broke off to talk about grown-up things, with Sara, Rafi, and Mom chatting about food. “I went ahead and stocked up the fridge and pantry in Scarlett’s old cabin,” Sara said with a warm smile

Meanwhile, Dad focused on Archie. “Ah, just the man I’ve been needing to talk to,” Dad said, clapping him on the back in greeting. “You’re the groundskeeper around here.”

“Guilty as charged,” Archie said, then flashed a chagrined expression. He gestured to the grounds. “Though more like *grounds-trying-to-keeper*. You’ll learn soon enough, but it’s an uphill battle out here against the elements. Sadly, I’ve been a bit of a one-man show lately.”

Dad nodded. “Well, I aim to change that. That’s all part of my grand plan. Don’t worry, you’ve got help now and extra hands.”

“You’re most welcome, then,” Archie said with an appreciative smile. “Oh, and who’s that little fella over there?” he said, spotting the baby cradled in Mom’s arms.

She tilted George toward them for closer inspection. He immediately scrunched up his face and started wailing loudly, displaying his two front teeth that had come in together last week. Everyone laughed and cooed at him, acting like he was so adorable.

“He looks like a...gopher,” Timothy said, imitating the baby’s cry and teeth.

“Gopher!” Natasha said, giggling. “He sure does. Guess he’s got a new camp nickname.”

“Gopher?” Silas spat out a laugh, risking a look at his mom.

But she smiled good-naturedly and started rocking George to hush him up. Silas turned back to the twins—he liked them already. And they were right. His brother did look like a...*gopher*. The nickname suited him.

“Well, I hate to break up this little welcome party,” Archie said, “but I best show you to Scarlett’s ole cabin before it gets any darker and them ghouls and spooks come out.”

Ghouls? Spooks?

Silas didn’t like the sound of that.

But he knew better than to say anything. He didn’t want the twins—who he hoped would become his new friends—to find out what a scaredy-cat he really was. Silas kept his mouth shut as they piled back into the family minivan with Archie and followed his directions up the gravel road to his aunt’s cabin, perched atop the highest bluff overlooking all of the Pride Lands.

“Roof leaks like the dickens,” Archie said, pointing to the wood-paneled ceiling. They were standing in the small kitchen. “So it’s a good thing it don’t rain much in these parts.”

“That’s what I said,” Dad replied in a cheerful voice, reaching down to muss Silas’s hair. But Silas shrank away.

“Well, until rainy season...” Archie added. “But that gives us time to fix it.”

Honestly, rainwater was the *least* of the concerns out here.

Mom disappeared into the master bedroom to change and feed George and put him down for bedtime. It was already getting late for the baby, and his fussing wouldn’t stop.

Silas stuck close to his dad as Archie showed them around the rest of the cabin. The floorboards creaked loudly with each step. The cabin itself was on the small side, with one large, main space that comprised a living room area with a wood-fired stove and a makeshift kitchen with only one two-burner stovetop, no oven, and a small fridge. But Archie explained that they still kept to camp tradition and gathered in the mess hall for meals.

“I reckon sand creeps into every nook and cranny,” Archie went on. “Can’t much keep it out, really. But you’ll get used to it. We all do, living out in these parts.”

They continued down the wood-paneled hall, where a bathroom branched off with a shower and no tub, and one other door. “This here is your room, kiddo,” Archie said, rapping on it and pushing the door open with a terrible creak. “Make yourself at home.”

The room was small and dark, furnished with two twin bunks with thin mattresses. He immediately missed his room back home, which had wall-to-wall carpeting and a big window.

“This is...my room?” Silas said uncertainly.

But Dad shot him a look.

“Yup, and this is our home now,” Dad reminded him. “George is going to stay in the bigger bedroom with us. So this little room and everything in it is all yours...for now.”

Those last two words—*for now*—hit Silas hard.

What did that mean?

He looked up with a start. The other bunk across the room started to look rather menacing. That was when Dad confirmed his worst fears. “But

don't get too used to having your own room. Soon as your little brother is old enough, he'll be bedding down with you in here."

"No, we can't share a room," Silas said. "It's too small."

"Don't worry, Son. It'll bring you closer together. He's gonna be your best friend. Trust me, you don't know how much your brother or sister means to you...until they're gone."

Dad's voice cracked on that last part. With that, he rapped on the doorframe and went back outside with Archie to unload more of their stuff from the van. His footsteps creaked across the cabin and vanished onto the front porch. Mom had settled into the master bedroom with George, of course. Silas turned back to inspect his room.

Ugh, Silas thought.

He'd never had to share a room before. He liked being an only child.

Hopefully, he would soon prove to his parents that George was actually an alien, and then he could go back to his home planet, wherever that was. Hopefully in a galaxy far, far away.

As Silas started pulling his favorite books about apex predators out of his backpack, along with his trusty, beat-up paperback copy of *Tarzan of the Apes*, the shadowy cabin grew darker with the setting sun, giving him a bad feeling. A dead person once lived here—and not just any dead person—his aunt. That creeped him out. He wondered if she died inside the cabin. That thought sent his heart racing on overdrive. He knew from watching those spooky movies with Jose that ghosts haunted places like this cabin, especially if the person had died recently.

The shadows in the room took on a sinister quality. They seemed to come alive. Who knew what was crawling in them? Not to mention the possibility of *ghosts*. With that thought, he bolted out of his room and back into the living room, looking for his father.

The sliding glass door to the back porch was open, letting in a strong breeze that chilled the air. Had they gone out there? Silas stepped outside. The sun had fully set now, casting the vast, derelict grounds into shadow. It wasn't like in Florida, where the daylight lingered long after sunset. Here it went from light to dark in mere seconds.

Silas peered out into the inky darkness. Something stirred in the shadows...*many* somethings. He heard croaks and bird calls and something that sent chills up his spine.

Screaming.

Worse, it sounded like...

Little kids screaming.

The cries reverberated around the valley, growing closer and increasing in number. “What’s...that?” he whispered under his breath, feeling his usual cowardice rise up.

His heart thumped faster and his breathing sped up as he backed away from the porch toward the safety of the cabin. The wilderness out here was far too *wild*. He missed the safety and comfort of their suburban home, with its double-paned windows and strong air-conditioning.

A dark shadow fell over him.

Then a hand grabbed his shoulder.



Silas tensed up and whipped around.

A shadowy figure stood on the porch, the wind tangling through its long, stringy hair. Was it his aunt's ghost? That made his heart hammer faster. He backed away in fear.

"No, don't hurt me...please!"

But then the figure stepped into the moonlight.

"Hey, you okay, kiddo?"

It was only Archie.

He had let his hair out of the bun and clutched the walking stick, which accounted for the ghostly shadow. The eerie voices screamed through the canyons again, louder this time.

"Do you hear that?" Silas asked, hating how his voice pitched up and sounded shrill.

"Oh, that's just the local *co-yotes*," Archie said with a knowing chuckle. "They're mostly harmless. Unless you've got a small dog or cat. Then watch out...*Boo!*"

He jumped at Silas, who let out a little yelp.

Feeling silly, he tried to relax.

The coyotes' eerie song continued, and the screech owls started up, too. The wildlife symphony sang to the half-moon, which had now risen over the Pride Lands. Nothing about this strange place felt familiar or safe to Silas, and that made him jumpier than usual.

"Coyotes?" Silas repeated. They didn't sound harmless to him. "What else is out there?"

"Oh, little cub," Archie said in a kindly voice. "You'll find out soon enough."

"But what about my baby brother?" Silas asked anxiously. "You said they prey on small pets. Well, what about small babies? George is little and helpless, too."

Archie frowned. "Best keep 'im close. Coyotes been known to steal a babe from a crib." He stopped when he saw Silas's terrified expression. "But remember these words—*hakuna matata*! Special camp slogan. No worries, right? That sort of thing hasn't happened in ages."

"*Hakuna matata*," Silas said, tasting the unfamiliar words on his tongue.

They had a nice ring to them. Saying them did make him feel better...a little bit. Maybe they had power.

"That's right," Archie said. "Anytime you get scared, just sing those two little words right out loud, and it'll cheer you up. That's what we used to teach all the summer campers."

"Thanks," Silas said and meant it. He also planned to tell his parents about the coyotes stealing babies from their cribs. His brother drove him crazy, but he didn't want him to get eaten.

Just abducted by aliens...his own kind...

"E.T. phone home," he joked to himself, then followed Archie back into the cabin and shut the sliding door with a solid *thwack*. That only partially silenced the howling and screeching, but it made it less scary. Maybe he could learn to deal with it.

On that positive note, he went back inside to start unpacking and prepare to settle in for the night.

* * *

After unpacking as much as they could—Dad said he’d finish getting the rest from the van the next day, as he was “beat”—and feasting on the homemade chicken tamales that Sara left for their family, which were positively delicious, if a bit spicy, Silas returned to his room.

Mom and Dad retired to bed in their room down the hall, where George was already fast asleep in his bassinet. But then the coyotes took up their shrill cries again.

Silas jerked his head toward the window, which was closed tight. However, the wood had warped, and dust, sand, and noise leaked through it.

Eyyyyyooooooooooooo.

He felt a terrible chill at the sound of their voices. He couldn’t shake the image of a coyote stealing a baby from his crib. But Silas reminded himself that his parents were there to protect George. Plus, Archie said nothing like that had happened in a very long time.

Silas flopped down on his bunk. Dust rose from the mattress, making him sneeze. He didn’t dare peek under the bed for fear of what might be lurking in the dark corners. Instead, he pulled a picture book called *Predators of the Serengeti* from his backpack.

He couldn’t explain why he was drawn to read about the very things that terrified him the most, except that somehow, when he was buried in the pages of books like this one, he felt braver and stronger than in real life. The books made him feel courageous, like Tarzan.

According to the book, the Serengeti was a national park all the way in Tanzania. It bordered Kenya, where Rafi said he grew up. It was also home to some of Africa’s most ferocious predators, including leopards and lions, of course. But even the herbivores could be dangerous, like black rhinos. He flipped to the page on them and ran his finger over a picture of the creature with the two horns jutting out of its nose. The dark leathery hide looked like a suit of armor and reminded him of a dinosaur more than a mammal.

After a few minutes, his eyelids grew heavy and started to sink. He yawned and pushed the book aside, reaching for the light switch on the bedside table. He flicked it, casting the room into darkness. He flipped over and tried to get comfortable on the thin, hard mattress.

It wasn’t easy.

Right as he was about to drift off, a red light pulsed in the darkness.

Silas sat up with a start.

What was that?

But his room was dark again.

Just pale moonlight spilled in from the window. Old curtains printed with turquoise feathers flapped gently. He lay back down, but again—

The red light pulsed, lighting up his room.

And this time, he saw where it was coming from.

The closet across the room. The door was cracked open slightly. The light was definitely coming from in there. He crept out of bed, his feet landing on the cold floorboards. They creaked under his weight. He could feel sand grinding into his toes.

His eyes were locked on the closet door—and whatever lay beyond it making that strange light. He grabbed his phone, triggered the flashlight, and shone it ahead of him.

His heart thumped as he crept across his room, tasting fear on his tongue like acrid metal. He reached the closet door, which, made of flimsy wood, was the kind of door that bunched up like an accordion as you slid it open. Slowly, he pushed it.

Screeeeeeeeech.

It made a horrible sound as it moved on rusty tracks. He jumped back and aimed the flashlight into the dark abyss beyond—

But then he relaxed slightly.

The closet was empty, aside from a few errant hangers dangling sadly from the rod. But then he shone the light down and saw it....

There was an old hidden chest pushed into the back of the closet. He approached it and inspected the exterior of the chest. The leather shell was engraved with strange symbols and crude drawings of lions and other African fauna that resembled those from his favorite books.

He ran his hands over the smooth leather, feeling the indentations of the images engraved and painted on it. There was a lion with a dark brown mane and green eyes. They gave the predator a treacherous yet intelligent appearance. Next to the lion with the green eyes, over the latch that kept the trunk sealed, there was an image of a baboon clutching a strange staff. Stranger still, it looked just like Archie's staff.

The one that had belonged to his aunt.

That was odd.

The baboon in the drawing held the staff toward the lock on the trunk. Fear gripped Silas's heart, but so did curiosity. The fact that the pictures

reminded him of his books made him feel a bit braver. He hoped that maybe there were more fun books inside the trunk.

But then he hesitated.

He knew he should fetch his parents to show them. Likely the trunk had belonged to his aunt and might be important. But he didn't want to risk waking the baby. Last time he had barged into his parents' room after bedtime, excited about a new animal he'd discovered in one of his wildlife books—warthogs, which were native to southern Sudan and Ethiopia and looked like funny, furry piglike creatures with tusks that could be deadly—he got an earful about “knocking first” and “not waking the baby.”

I should wait until tomorrow, he told himself.

But his hand seemed to have a mind of its own.

It reached for the latch. The shadows in his room seemed to stretch out their long fingers, almost like claws. He shut his eyes, held his breath, and grasped for the lock—

But when he tried to open the latch...

The chest was locked tight. He frowned at it.

Only, the lock didn't look like the kind that used a key. That was super weird.

So how did you open it?

But then his fear caught up to him. He quickly backtracked away from the trunk, shut the closet door, and climbed back into his bed. He pulled the sheet up and waited for the strange light to flash again, but his room remain bathed only in pale moonlight from the window.

But still, his heart was beating too fast to let him fall asleep. That was when he missed his friends like a sharp punch to the gut. They always made him feel better when he was scared or anxious. But he couldn't tell them the truth about how run-down the camp was for two reasons.

First off, he didn't want them to worry. Well, any more than they already did. And secondly, he didn't want to scare them away from visiting next summer. Instead, he fired off a faux cheerful text to Jose and Tamara, hoping they wouldn't read between the lines.

Whew, made it to Arizona!

Safe and sound...or...

“Hakuna matata”

That means... “no worries.” 😊

It’s the camp slogan. You’re gonna love it here. 😊

He added a bunch of happy face and camping emojis, then waited for a response—those dots that would indicate they were typing back to him—while his eyes grew heavier and heavier.

But nothing came through.

He double-checked his signal, but miraculously he got three bars out in the middle of nowhere. He had good reception. Had his friends already forgotten about him?

He started to panic, but then he looked at the time and remembered it was a three-hour time difference between Florida and Arizona. They were probably fast asleep on the East Coast. He’d have to wait until the next morning for their response.

With a sigh, he set his phone to silent and left it charging on the bedside table. Again, he tried to force himself to sleep, but the bunk was hard and the sheets were thin and scratchy. Worse, all night long the coyotes screamed in the valley like ghostly children lost in the night. Then, woken by their cries several times in the night, George joined in the chorus.

Silas cowered under the thin blanket and barely slept a wink. He missed his home and his friends. With the time change, it would be harder to stay in touch, too. Tears pricked his eyes. He hated being a crybaby—that was George. He was too old for that lame stuff.

But the tears spilled out anyway. He swiped them away.

He hated this new room and creepy old cabin in the middle of nowhere. How could his life get any worse?



The next morning, Silas was in a rotten mood. He was exhausted and miserable from poor sleep and missing his friends, despite texting with them early that morning. He thought it would help, but it only made him miss Jose and Tamara more.

But Dad and Mom and even George were as chipper as the bright sun in the blue sky. “Good morning,” Dad said in a cheerful tone as Silas emerged from his room, rubbing his eyes.

“Is it really good?” Silas said. “Or are you just saying that because you’re supposed to?”

Mom exchanged a look with Dad, who smirked and threw his hands up in surrender.

“Wow, you’re definitely acting like a teenager now,” Mom said, bouncing George on her knee. “They say it happens overnight, but I didn’t believe it.”

That made Silas feel even more...well...moody and teenager-y.

“Come on, breakfast time,” Dad said. “I’m starved. Last one to the mess hall is a rotten egg.”

Silas rolled his eyes. Sometimes Dad said the weirdest, corniest stuff that made no sense.

Dad held open the door while Mom gathered George and all his paraphernalia—why babies needed so much stuff just to exist was beyond Silas—and they tramped out of the cabin.

In the bright, unfiltered sunlight that shone down on the camp relentlessly and was turning the day hotter by the minute, they walked toward the mess hall for breakfast. Their shoes sank into the sand as tiny pebbles crept into their socks.

Despite Silas’s bad mood, it was nice being able to see more of the campgrounds, also known as the Pride Lands. The grounds themselves were studded with mesas, bluffs, and red rock formations. The vegetation was the total opposite of Florida’s, which was lush and tropical. Everything here looked tough and prickly, probably because it had to be in order to survive the desert heat with little water. He was especially fascinated by the devil’s-claws.

He picked one up. It was a type of seed pod with two curved horns, kind of like a devil’s talons. He’d looked it up in one of his books. They were scattered all over the sand like little warnings. Meanwhile, hiking trails wound through the rocks, connecting all the buildings, from their cabin to the thatched huts for the campers, to the mess hall, groundskeeper’s shed, and infirmary, which made up the main area.

This was the high desert, meaning that the temperature would climb during the day only to drop precipitously at night. The air lacked humidity, so it couldn’t hold on to the sun’s warmth like back in Orlando. It was also thinner, so Silas found himself huffing and puffing just from walking to breakfast. They all were, but Dad promised he would grow used to the altitude.

“Your aunt Scarlett sure was something else,” Dad said nostalgically when he saw the colorful wooden signs posted all over camp with creative names for locations, like Ostrich Nest Lookout and Lion’s Den Mess Hall, which was where they were headed for breakfast.

“She came up with all this?” Silas asked in awe, feeling his bad mood melting under the sun.

Dad nodded. “Growing up, she always had an active imagination and made up stories and dreamed of going on adventures. She kind of reminds me of you, actually. And all your books.”

Dad looked over at Silas, who clutched his *Predators* book like a comfort blanket.

“I wish I’d gotten to meet her,” he said. His stomach growled, and he had to admit he was looking forward to Sara’s cooking after feasting on her tamales the previous night.

“Well, exploring her camp is the next best thing,” Dad said, forcing a smile, though tears were in his eyes. “She poured her heart and soul into this place. I’m sorry we didn’t travel out here before she died, but finances were tight and you were so young. We always planned to when you got older. But...well...goes to show you can’t take anything for granted.”

Silas nodded. “We’re here now, right?”

“Yes, and that’s what counts,” Dad said. “I’m sure your aunt’s spirit knows that we’re here to take good care of the place that meant the most to her.”

“Is that why she never got married or had kids?” Silas asked. “Because of the camp?”

“Well, you could say the camp was like her partner, and the campers were her kids. In that sense, she had a ton of kids. Not everyone has to live the same way, you know.”

“Guess you’re right,” Silas said with a surprised look. “Never thought of it that way.”

Somehow knowing that you could make your own path in life made him feel better and freer. Maybe he’d grow up to be like his parents, or maybe he’d be more like Aunt Scarlett and travel the world having adventures and then bringing them back home to share with other kids.

They reached the Lion’s Den Mess Hall—a large, wood-paneled building with colorful animal pictures painted all over it that could have come out of one of his books. The screen doors clapped shut behind them with a loud *thwack*, announcing their arrival, while the cooking aromas hit Silas’s nose right away. He also heard the happy chattering of many jovial voices.

“Make yourselves at home!” Sara called out from the kitchen as the others waved at them from the long wooden tables with benches. It was kind of like a picnic indoors.

Silas spotted the twins, but also Rafi and Archie. Meanwhile, Sara bustled in and out of the kitchen's swinging doors, carrying large silver platters of breakfast food items and sliding them onto the center of the table. Everything here was served family style.

From the looks of it, she'd prepared a feast for their arrival—bacon, scrambled eggs with cheese, pancakes with maple syrup and real butter, even some chocolate chip ones for the kids.

Silas climbed into a seat next to them, while Sara loaded up his plate with chocolate chip pancakes. Then she slipped him some homemade whipped cream with a conspiratorial wink.

"Don't tell your folks."

Silas beamed at her and felt his mouth watering. It felt like home—well, the home he always wanted, where he didn't eat cold cereal by himself every morning. Right away he adored Sara and her motherly energy, something he'd been missing from his own mother since George.

"See all those pictures?" Natasha said through a mouthful of pancake. She pointed to the wall that was filled with framed photographs. "Those are all the old campers."

"Oh wow...so many of them," Silas said. "And look at all the animals, too."

Some of the old black-and-white pictures looked like they dated back to the inception of the camp. His aunt appeared in each photo, aging as they went along. In each image, she wore a safari outfit—a khaki button-up shirt, matching shorts, socks hiked up to her knees, and hiking boots. A wide-brimmed hat crowned her head, while she clutched her walking stick. In many of the photos, Zazu was perched on the top of the staff, completing her signature look.

"Oh, where's Zazu?" he asked the twins. He scanned the mess hall, hoping to spot the parrot.

"We left him in his cage at home. He kept repeating '*danger...danger...beware...the arch*,'" Timothy said. "He's acting kind of strange...."

"Well, *stranger* than normal," Natasha added with a giggle. "Which is saying a lot."

Timothy nodded. "Yeah, he's probably not used to newcomers anymore. We've been closed to campers for the last two summers."

"How come?" Silas asked with a frown.

“I dunno,” Timothy said, chewing his breakfast with his mouth open. “Scarlett wasn’t feeling very well. She started acting kind of weird. I guess the upkeep got to be too much.”

“Yeah, she was planning to reopen this summer,” Natasha chimed in. “But then the accident happened....”

“What accident?” Silas said, perking up.

But Sara shot them a look from across the table—and the twins hushed up.

That was weird. Then something else popped into his head. He remembered Billie, the gas station worker, giving them a warning...*Bad things happen to folks who live up there*. That made Silas feel even more freaked out. Was the accident what she meant by that?

His heart hammered, but then he glanced down at his plate. How could he be scared when he had chocolate chip pancakes? He forked up the rest and then heaped seconds on his plate, as his troubles seemed to melt away like the chocolate on his tongue.

Archie turned to Silas, watching him eat with an approving look.

“Hey, kid, how you liking it up here?” When Silas didn’t respond right away, he added, “What’s wrong? *Co-yotes* got your tongue?”

Everyone laughed, especially the twins. Timothy even spat out some pancake. Silas worried that they were teasing him, but then he relaxed. They were all smiling warmly.

“I’ve never heard it said like that...” he replied. “*Co-yo-tees* is how we say it.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Archie said with a wink. “I know it’s a lot of new stuff. Must be hard, all this change. But you’re hanging in there, I reckon.”

Silas felt like he could trust Archie. He lowered his voice. “Uh, yeah... it’s been tough,” he confessed. “I guess I miss my old home and friends. And everything is a bit strange here.”

Archie nodded. “That’s perfectly normal. When I first got the job at the camp, I was a young cub like you. Well, older than you are now,” he said with a shake of his head. “But still pretty young, all things considered. Everything out here in the Pride Lands made me jump and shake like a leaf.”

Silas found himself relating to all that. “It did? You were...afraid of stuff?”

“Yup, all the time,” Archie confided in a low voice. He clutched his staff tighter. “But then I heard about the...*Elephant Graveyard*.”

Silas sat up straighter and paid attention. He had been wondering about that. Graveyards were at the top of his phobia list. “What’s that?”

The twins giggled and rolled their eyes. “Oh, here he goes again with his camp stories.”

But Silas was hooked. He’d never heard of anything like an elephant graveyard in his wildlife books.

“Can I trust you?” Archie asked, leaning forward and clutching his strange staff.

“Yes, of course,” Silas said right away, feeling his heart thump a little faster in anticipation. He got the feeling that whatever the groundskeeper was about to tell him, it was really important.

Archie glanced around, then lowered his voice. “Well, the camp legend goes that *only the bravest campers* can make it across the rope bridge and reach the Elephant Graveyard.”

“What’s in the Elephant Graveyard?” Silas asked, both intrigued and a little intimidated.

Archie thumped him playfully with the staff.

The twins giggled at Archie’s familiar antics.

“Ouch!” Silas said, rubbing his head, though it didn’t hurt, really.

“What’d you do that for?”

“Now, I can’t tell you that,” Archie said with a silly grin. “That would ruin it. Only the bravest campers can discover the truth for themselves.”

“Only the bravest?” Silas repeated, liking how that sounded. “How do you know if you’re brave enough?”

“Nobody knows until they prove it by crossing the bridge,” Archie said, then backtracked. “But I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s far too dangerous for a young cub like you. Plus, you’re a newbie. Maybe when you get older, kiddo.”

“No, wait...I’m brave enough,” Silas said. “I swear it...just tell me a little more about it...”

But Archie thumped him again, playfully. “Oh, I’ve already said too much! I suppose you’d have found out sooner or later, you being so clever and all. Just promise me you’ll never visit that dreadful place. I’d hate for anything bad to happen to you.”

“Uh, I promise...” Silas said, though he didn’t really mean it. Now he was fixated on the idea.

He wanted to ask more questions, but Dad called Archie away from the breakfast table. They needed to get to work on repairing the camp.

Before he left the mess hall, Archie leaned over and whispered in Silas’s ear.

“Remember...it’s our little secret.”

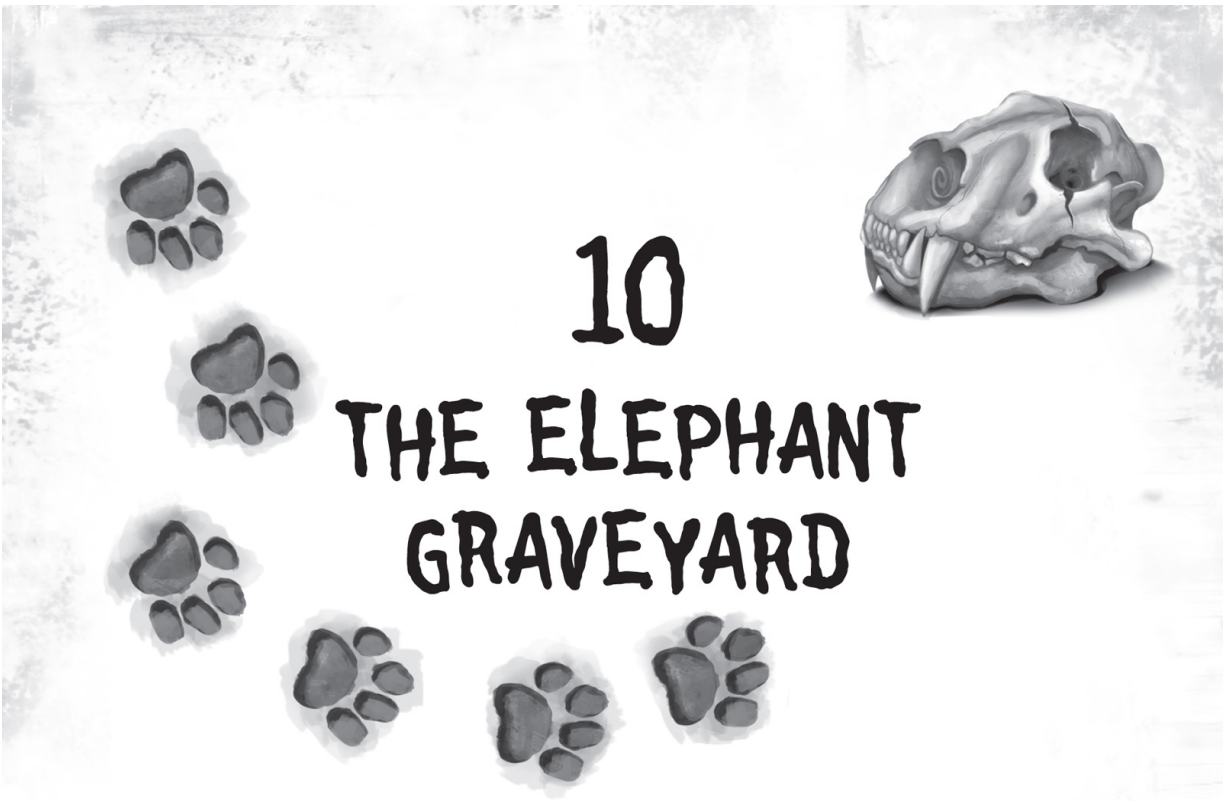
As he watched them depart to get to work, Silas couldn’t stop thinking about the Elephant Graveyard. For the first time since he arrived here, he felt hopeful. This sounded like a real adventure, like the ones in his favorite books. But there was more. Maybe this was a way for him to prove that he was brave after all, not a scared little kid.

With that cheerful thought, he polished off his pancakes and vowed to investigate it later. Despite Archie’s warning, he knew he didn’t have a choice.

He could cross the rope bridge. He could find the graveyard. He could overcome his phobias. Then he could prove once and for all that he wasn’t a coward.

This was a chance for a fresh start.

The Elephant Graveyard...here I come.



After breakfast, when Mom was busy with George and Dad was working with Archie on the camp, Silas snuck away in search of the Elephant Graveyard. He couldn't forget what Archie had said. *Only the bravest campers...* that echoed through his head like a catchy refrain.

He wanted to be one of them...badly.

An old white van barreled around the corner, trailing sand and dust that wafted across the camp like smoke. Silas had to jump back to avoid getting hit by the speeding vehicle.

Screech.

The van skidded to a halt. He felt his heart lurch in his chest. The windshield was cracked, and he couldn't see the driver's face in the haze of dust. Only their frightening silhouette.

But he could hear them. The voice made him shudder.

"Scared, little cub?"

The voice was raspy and rough. He recognized it right away, but then the smoke cleared enough so he could see the face of Billie, from the gas

station in town.

“Uh, I’m not scared...” He trailed off.

He was lying, of course. He was afraid. A little.

“Well, you should be,” Billie said, looking him up and down. Her eyes narrowed to slits, sending another deep shudder running up his spine.

“Outsiders don’t last long in the desert.”

“Wh-what...do you mean?” Silas stammered.

She gave him a bad feeling. Goose bumps pricked his skin, despite the midday heat.

“Just be careful, little cub,” she replied. “Never know what will crawl out of the sand...and bite you!” She snapped her teeth shut, making Silas flinch back with a start.

Then she cackled at her trick. “Anyway, best be going. Gotta get these deliveries up to Sara before they spoil in the heat.” She patted the groceries piled up in the back of the van.

With that, Billie gunned the accelerator and shot away up the hill toward the mess hall, leaving Silas in her dust. He felt jittery and rattled. No question about it. She gave him the willies. He didn’t trust her. But he fought back against his fear. This was his chance to prove his courage. He was too old to get spooked so easily. That was baby stuff, like for George.

Plus, he had a mission.

The Elephant Graveyard.

This was his chance to prove to Billie—and everyone else—that he wasn’t afraid. And more, that he did belong at Camp Pride Rock. His family belonged here, too.

It was almost midday, and the temperature had risen, making him sweat through his red T-shirt, which had GATORS printed on it along with a drawing of the reptiles—his old school mascot. But he didn’t give up despite the blazing heat. He kept going, following the signs.

He reached the edge of the Pride Lands, which were bordered by a steep ravine. Just like Archie had described, a flimsy rope bridge traversed the canyon. The precipitous drop was at least fifty feet straight down. The signs posted read **DANGER! KEEP OUT! FALLING ROCKS!**

But he ignored them and followed the path that led toward the rope bridge. He spotted some devil’s-claws and reached down to scoop them up. He had a growing collection of the horned seedpods stashed in his room. Suddenly, something darted by his foot—

It was a scorpion.

He jumped back just in time.

Luckily, he had on the hiking boots his dad bought him for their trip. His heart shot into overdrive, hammering in his chest. But then the creature scampered away, vanishing under a rock.

"I'm okay," he whispered to himself. "I have to be brave...this is my chance."

He continued following the signs, making his way toward the Elephant Graveyard. The trail grew harder to follow, washed out by rain and wind. His feet sank into the sand, which trickled into his socks and tickled his toes. His shirt was already soaked with sweat. Sweat also dripped into his eyes, making them sting. But still he kept going down the trail.

He couldn't give up now.

A few minutes later he reached the stone archway that led to the rope bridge. It was in disrepair with rocks crumbling off it. More ominous signs were posted over it that read:

DANGER! KEEP OUT!

Silas felt another jolt of fear sweep through him. But he swallowed hard against it. This was his best chance to prove he was brave to everyone, but especially himself.

"*Hakuna matata*...no worries," he chanted like a mantra, remembering how Archie said that it always made you feel better.

Ignoring the warning signs, he passed under the arch, stepping over the rocks. He reached the bridge and hesitated. The bridge itself looked even more perilous. It was strung up by ropes that connected worn-down wooden planks, forming a sort of crossing.

The ropes were anchored to big boulders on either side of the deep ravine. They didn't look very sturdy, and they were fraying a bit. Some of the wooden planks were missing, creating wide gaps. He glanced down into the ravine.

A trickle of water snaked through jagged rocks that jutted from the ground, threatening to impale or seriously injure anyone unfortunate enough to fall. Silas knew this was a bad idea, but he remembered the groundskeeper's words.

Only the bravest campers can make it across the rope bridge and reach the Elephant Graveyard.

Silas took a deep breath, then started inching his way across. Creaking with each step, the bridge swayed back and forth, making him feel dizzy.

He reached a wide gap in the bridge, where the boards had fallen away. His eyes locked onto the stream fifty feet below. He started to panic and grabbed onto the ropes, but they buckled in his grip. The bridge swayed even more, threatening to drop him.

He hung on tight. But he knew that he had to get ahold of himself and stop acting like a scaredy-cat. He could do this. He *had* to do this. Slowly, he peeled his eyes open. His heart thumped faster, but he fought to stay calm. Carefully, he released the ropes and leapt over the gap.

And landed on the other side.

The bridge swayed again, back and forth, then stabilized.

Whew, that was close, he thought. But he had made it across the gap. That was what mattered. Overhead, vultures flew in lazy circles in the blue sky, as if hoping he'd fall to his death so they could scavenge his remains. But he resolved not to let that happen.

Moving with care, he stepped around the broken and splintered planks and leapt over the missing sections. He was more than halfway across now. The farther he got, the braver he felt.

Wow, this isn't so bad, he thought, growing more confident with each step.

"Ha, I laugh in the face of danger!" he yelled back to the archway, to the sign, to the bridge, to the ravine, and the Elephant Graveyard beyond it. His voice echoed out loudly around him. Feeling buoyed by that, he stepped onto the next plank, when suddenly—

The rope on one side of the bridge snapped.

"Oh, no!" Silas screamed as the bridge lurched and twisted sideways.

He grabbed the other rope at the last moment. His feet dangled perilously over the steep drop-off. He made the mistake of glancing down, where sharp rocks waved menacingly at him, promising to impale him if he let go. Stars danced in front of his eyes as he threatened to black out.

"Help me!" he screamed, holding on with white knuckles.

But nobody was around to hear him. It was deserted. Then something even worse happened—

The other side of the rope bridge started to fray. The rough threads snapped, one...by...one. With each breakage, the bridge shuddered and

swayed. He couldn't help screaming for help again. His hands were already growing numb and tingly.

He couldn't hold on much longer.

11



QUIVER WITH FEAR



“Please, someone help me!”

Silas hung on for dear life and screamed again. His knuckles had turned white, and soon they’d start to slip. He hoped someone...anyone...would hear him. But the main campground was far away. He was in the middle of nowhere.

“Please...the bridge...help me!”

His voice echoed through the ravine, then died out.

He was alone. Nobody was coming for him.

His feet dangled precariously over the gulch. He didn’t dare look at the sharp rocks below....

“I’m sorry...please help me!”

His voice came out raw and shaky. Soon, even his voice would give way to whispers. Just like that, he realized the whole adventure was a mistake. He was and would always be...

A scaredy-cat.

If he lived through this—which was looking less likely with every second that passed—then he would never do anything foolhardy to prove he was brave again. He focused on holding on for as long as he could, even though he barely had any feeling left in his fingers.

Snap.

Another piece of rope broke, making the bridge shudder and sway. Silas almost lost his grip. He glanced over. The rope was almost half gone. But then he heard the trampling of feet— Followed by a shocked voice.

“Silas, oh, no!”

It was Natasha. “Timothy, go get help!”

He heard footsteps running away, and then Natasha approached the bridge, careful to stay on solid ground. She scooted as close to the edge as she could get without falling.

“Hold on, Silas! Timothy is getting help. Just don’t let go! You’ve got to hang in there.”

“Please...” Silas gasped. “Hurry, I can’t hold on much longer.”

“They’re coming...just hold on,” she said. “You’re not falling on my watch.”

Her voice—steady and warm—was like a lifeline tossed to save him. It gave him more strength than he knew he had. He clung to the rope even as his fingers tingled and burned. The pain was terrible. He felt like such a fool for trying to prove that he was brave.

Now, here he was...about to plunge to his death...

But if the fall didn’t kill him, his fear certainly would. *Can you die from total mortification?* he wondered dimly. Stars danced in front of his eyes.

A few terrible minutes later, Timothy reappeared with Silas’s dad. “Oh, no, Silas...” Dad said when he saw him hanging there. “Hold on...I’m coming to get you.”

The sound of his voice reached Silas, who dangled halfway across the bridge.

“Dad, hurry...I can’t hold on much longer.”

Wasting no time, Dad started across, grasping onto the rope and stepping from board to board, even though the bridge was twisted sideways.

Each step made it sway precariously.

“Dad...be careful,” Silas whimpered, worried for his father. “It’s dangerous....”

“Son, just worry about holding on,” Dad said, inching closer. “I’m going to save you.”

In that moment, as he fought to stay conscious and not let go, Silas felt grateful for his father. Sure, they clashed sometimes, but there was no doubt his dad loved him. There was nothing his father wouldn’t do to save his family, including moving them all the way to Arizona.

Finally, Dad reached him and pulled him up. Silas clung to his father in the fiercest hug of all time.

“Hold on tight,” Dad said. “I’m getting you off this bridge.”

Holding on to Silas, his father made his way back across the bridge. *Snap*. Another strand broke loose, making the bridge drop another foot.

“Oh, no,” Silas said. “Watch out.”

Their feet dangled over the ravine. He could see fear flash through his father’s eyes, something that he’d never witnessed before.

That scared him more than anything else.

Silas clung to his shoulders as his father tried to speed up and get across the bridge. They didn’t have much time before the whole rope snapped. Only one more foot to go...and then his father pushed him onto solid ground. Silas felt hands grab him.

“We’ve got him,” the twins said.

Silas collapsed into the sand, feeling relief. White stars danced in his vision, and his breath came out in strangled gasps.

But he was safe.

His father had saved him.

“Dad, hurry up...” he said, sitting up and watching as his father made the last few steps.

He’d pushed Silas out ahead of him to save him first. The bridge swayed as his father was about to step off the bridge, when— *Snap. Snap. Snap.*

The rope on the other side of the bridge broke off and sent his father plunging far below.

“Noooooooo!” Silas screamed helplessly, watching as his father plummeted through the air into the deep ravine. His dad landed on the jagged rocks, crying out in pain. A horrible *crack* rang out. Then he went silent. That was worse than him screaming.

Way worse.

Silas peered over the edge as the twins yelled for help and ran back toward the main camp. His father lay across the rocks at a strange angle. He wasn't moving.

"Come on, Dad! Get up!" Silas yelled until he lost his voice.

Overhead, the vultures circled lower, as if sensing the promise of death in their midst. His dad hadn't roused...and his leg looked bent at a bad angle.

Feeling guilty, Silas backed away in horror.

This was all his fault.



As he peered down into the ravine—at his father, who just lay there—Silas felt like the whole world dropped out below his feet, like he was the one falling, even though he was standing on solid ground.

And it was all his fault.

“Dad...please wake up!”

Tears leaked from his eyes, and Silas sobbed. But his father remained unmoving. The vultures were circling even lower now. Soon they’d swoop down into the ravine to pick at his father’s body.

The twins returned and tried to comfort him. But this was the most terrible thing that had ever happened. Suddenly, Silas regretted complaining about the move and his baby brother. He would give anything just to have his father be okay again.

That was when Rafi arrived with his medical kit.

“Silas, it’s going to be okay,” Rafi said. “I called the paramedics. They’re on their way.”

But Silas could see the worry on Rafi's face, etched around his eyes and in the way his lips pressed together into a thin line. Not waiting for more help, Rafi climbed down into the ravine, moving with both speed and nimble precision. His medical pack was thrust over his shoulders.

"He's a rock climber," Timothy said, watching Rafi picking his way toward the bottom.

"Yeah, he takes us climbing with him sometimes on the red rocks," Natasha said. "Don't worry, he's going to get your dad and fix him."

But all Silas could think was, why did everyone keep telling him not to worry, when clearly his father was badly injured, if not worse?

Rafi reached the bottom of the ravine and tended to Dad, who still wasn't moving. He reached in his bag and waved something under Dad's nose, and then his father started to stir. He wasn't dead, thankfully. But his leg didn't look good at all.

"See, he's awake," Timothy said, pointing.

Dad moved, but then grimaced in pain.

"Barely," Silas said in a thick voice.

His dad was hurt, all thanks to him and his foolish actions. Rafi worked hard to stabilize his broken leg. Then the sound of a helicopter broke the silence and chased the vultures away. A few seconds later, a red medical vehicle materialized in the air above them.

"Look, they're here!" Natasha said, pointing to the sky. "They're gonna save your dad."

The helicopter hovered for a few seconds, then swooped down and came in for a landing on a clearing a few feet away. The chopper's blades sent sand and brush flying at them. Silas felt his eyes sting from the debris.

He watched with the twins as the paramedics leapt out and worked with Rafi to load his dad onto a stretcher and then carry him into the medical helicopter. Rafi hopped into the cabin with the medics as the chopper prepared to take off.

The wind from the rotors kicked up, and the noise was deafening.

"Where're they taking him?" Silas asked, yelling to be heard over the helicopter.

"To the closest hospital," Timothy said, exchanging looks with his sister. "It's pretty far away in Phoenix. That's why they had to come in a helicopter to rescue him."

Natasha nodded. “If they drove him in an ambulance, it would take forever.”

Silas had seen ambulances in real life, but nothing like this dramatic helicopter rescue. This was the kind of thing that he thought only happened in movies.

“Yeah, so we always have the medics on call,” Timothy said. “In case campers get hurt.”

“Or my father...” Silas said.

Mom appeared over the hill, out of breath and clutching George to her chest. He fussed softly, as if aware of the tragedy unfolding before him. She rushed over to Silas.

“Oh, no, are you okay?” she gasped, checking him over for injuries.

“Uh, I’m fine...just a few scratches,” he said. “Dad saved me, but he fell...”

He trailed off. Guilt pooled in his gut like acid.

His mom staggered over and looked down into the ravine. She let out a soft gasp. Her eyes went to the idling helicopter, where the paramedics were strapping his father in. She hugged Silas, mashing him into George, who wriggled in protest. Then she released him and peered down.

“What on earth were you doing out here?” she asked.

Silas swallowed hard. The guilt churned, mixing with regret.

“Uh, just exploring...like in my books,” he said lamely. “The rope bridge snapped, and I fell. But the twins heard me—and they got Dad to come and rescue me. Only he fell...”

The words dried up in his throat, bringing fresh guilt. He couldn’t tell her the truth. That he was on a foolhardy mission to prove his courage, only to find out he was a coward after all. He remembered his promise: if he survived he would never do something like this ever again.

They watched as the cabin doors shut and locked, then the chopper lifted off, levitating out of the ravine, avoiding the rocks and other dangerous obstacles. Finally, the helicopter got free. The twins cheered, while Rafi gave them a big thumbs-up sign through the window.

But all Silas could think as he watched the chopper fly away with Rafi and his father was *This is all my fault. I caused my dad to get hurt. I ruined everything.*

Mom took George and Silas to visit their father. His leg was broken in two places and had needed surgery to fix it. The huge cast went all the way up to his thigh, and he had to stay in the hospital for two days after that to recover.

Silas hadn't been to a hospital since George was born, but this room felt different from the labor and delivery wing. And it smelled different, too. Like rubbing alcohol, chemicals, and something sweet. This was where sick people came.

He felt afraid as Mom led him toward the bed behind the curtain. The silhouette looked shadowy and forbidding—kind of like a strange monster. Then Mom swept the curtain aside.

"Hey, there's my family," Dad said, grinning. But pain lingered around his eyes. His face looked gaunt, while his broken leg was strung up in a strange contraption with ropes and wires that looked more like a torture device from one of Jose's spooky movies.

Silas hesitated. But Mom pushed him over to the hospital bed, where he embraced his father. The doctor walked into the room, holding a clipboard and scanning it.

"How you feeling today?" he asked without looking up.

"Better now that my family is here," Dad said, flashing them one of his signature grins. But even Silas could see how much pain he felt. "They're the best medicine."

The doctor looked up—and smiled at them. "Isn't that the truth?"

They all laughed, but then the doctor turned more serious.

"Well, you're one lucky guy. It's a miracle you survived a fall like that. Nine times out of ten, that sort of thing would prove fatal. A shattered leg and a few broken ribs might not seem like a good thing. But trust me, it's a lucky break." He chuckled, then added, "Sorry, lame doctor humor."

But Dad laughed, too. "Trust me, doc. Don't I know it."

"Thank you so much for taking such good care of him," Mom said, jiggling George to trigger a smile. "The nurses have been great too."

Everyone looked so happy and positive.

But still, all Silas could think—

This is all my fault.

It circled through his head on repeat, like a bad pop song, even after they went back home.

* * *

Back at camp, Silas helped his mother and the twins make WELCOME HOME and FEEL BETTER SOON signs and hang them up. Then they lit candles, which they stuck into vanilla cupcakes that Sara had baked for Dad's homecoming. Everyone cheered when Dad limped through the front door on crutches.

"Welcome home!" they all sang out in unison.

Even Sara and Archie had come over for the occasion...with Zazu. He flapped his wings.

"Welcome home...arhhh!" he chirped.

Dad hopped through the door on crutches, uneasy on his feet and assisted by both Mom and Rafi. He half-heartedly tried to do a raise-the-roof dance move.

But then he almost tripped over the door frame. Mom shot him a chastising look. She was bouncing George, who wasn't crying for once, on her hip.

"Be careful, Ricardo...*Reyes*," she chided, using his full name, which meant he was in trouble. "You're not giving me another heart attack today."

"Sorry, Margarita," he said, closing the distance and pecking her on the cheek.

He leaned over and did the same to George, patting his back. Then they helped Dad over to the sofa and propped his leg up on several pillows.

Mom handed him a tall glass of lemonade and the TV remote, even though they barely got any reception up here. The Wi-Fi wasn't strong enough for streaming, not that it mattered. The old, square TV shaped like a box with antennas looked like it belonged in a museum. It was surprising that it still turned on at all.

But even though his father was back home, all Silas felt was this horrible sensation in the pit of his stomach. It felt like drowning, but also like getting food poisoning at the same time. No matter what he did, or what he ate, he couldn't seem to shake it. Even the cupcakes turned sour in his mouth. He pushed his away, half-eaten.

He felt like a total fraud. Making matters worse, Silas was uninjured—not even a scratch or bruise—but his father had a broken leg and more.

"Listen, he has to keep his leg elevated," Rafi explained, carefully arranging the pillows around it. "Doc's orders. To prevent blood clots after

surgery.”

That sounded scary.

“He can get up with crutches,” Rafi went on, setting down a clear plastic bag of prescription bottles and discharge orders on the kitchen counter. “But not for too long.”

“I’m like a bionic man now,” Dad joked from the sofa, forcing the words out. “They put pins and screws all up my leg. Bet I can’t go through a metal detector.”

The twins giggled. “You’re like a robot,” Timothy said, making beeps like a droid.

“Or Iron Man!” Natasha said. “He always saves the world. And cracks jokes.”

“At the same time,” Timothy added.

But Silas just felt freaked out.

“How long do you have to wear the cast?” he asked.

“Six weeks,” Dad said. “Maybe longer.”

But then he winced from pain and clutched at his side. Rafi examined him quickly, pushing a stethoscope into his chest, then relaxed slightly.

“He’s got some bruising and a few broken ribs from the fall, so pain is to be expected,” Rafi said. “Not much we can do for those. Rest and time are the best medicine.”

Silas felt grateful to have someone like Rafi around to help out. He had such a kindly demeanor and clearly knew what he was doing.

“Guess I’m not Iron Man yet,” Dad joked, and winced again.

“You heard him, Ricardo,” Mom said, shooting him another look. “Rest means your mouth, too.”

With that, Mom handed Rafi a cupcake and shooed him toward the front door. “Like you said, rest is important,” she said, patting his back in gratitude. “You’ve been at the hospital for two days straight now. Your turn to get some, too.”

Then everyone else took their leave, catching the hint that his father needed peace and quiet now. Silas watched as the front door closed, and the happy chatter of the homecoming party died out.

Now Dad was back to sitting on the sofa in a morose mood. It even looked like their old sofa. The television flickered in the background while he snoozed in an upright position with his leg elevated. He couldn’t sleep in the bed yet. Worse still, Dad couldn’t work right now or repair the camp

like he had planned, setting back their reopening. Silas had heard his parents discussing it in hushed voices.

Meanwhile, Mom was taking care of both the baby and her husband. She had dark circles under her eyes from worrying and lack of sleep. All of this made Silas feel *horrible*.

Talking to his father the next day didn't make it any better.

"Son, what were you thinking?" Dad asked with a disappointed shake of his head. He patted the sofa next to him, indicating that Silas should take a seat.

"Uh, I guess I wanted to prove I was brave..." Silas mumbled, feeling foolish.

He sat stiffly, afraid to move and dislodge Dad's broken leg from the pillow fort propping it up. He didn't want to do anything to make it worse. Well, worse than it already was.

"Where'd you get that silly idea?" Dad replied with a frown.

"Uh, from my books," Silas said, not wanting to get Archie into trouble, too. After all, he had tried to warn Silas about it being dangerous. It wasn't the groundskeeper's fault.

"Son, being brave doesn't mean you go looking for trouble," Dad said, flipping the channel to static. "That's what cowards do. Courage is how you act when the trouble finds you."

Silas felt even worse now. Regret churned in his stomach, mixing with the terrible guilt, making him want to shrivel up and...well...disappear.

"I'm sorry, Dad," he said, the words drying up in his throat like sand. The static flickering across the television made him feel like his life was flickering away. "I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

Dad flipped the channel again, this time to colorful static. He kept switching, looking for something, anything, to watch on the relic. But no clear reception came through.

"Well, be more careful in the future," Dad said. "I hope you learned a lesson. The camp needs a lot of work to fix it up and isn't safe yet. Next time, I might not be there to save you."

Those words hit Silas hard and carried an ominous message.

The next time could be worse.



“Hey, little cub,” Archie called out when he saw Silas climbing the hill to his hut. The sun beat down mercilessly. “What brings you out here?”

Archie stepped back from hammering the fence, where he was reattaching boards that had come loose. He clutched a hammer and nails.

“Well, I had an idea,” Silas said, feeling silly but forcing himself to ask anyway.

“What’s that?” Archie said. “Spit it out, son. Does the co-yote have your tongue?”

Silas blushed. “Right. Since my dad got hurt, maybe I can help out... until he feels better.”

Archie reached for his water bottle, swigging it down. Sweat dripped down his face. His staff rested a few feet away, propped up against an old tree stump. He seemed to think it over.

“Working out here in the sun is hard work,” Archie said. “Not like school, or playing video games. You’re gonna sweat like the dickens.”

“I don’t mind,” Silas said. “I just want to help out, since, well...it was all my fault....”

He felt guilt and regret churn in his stomach. Lately, he had that feeling all the time. It was worse than feeling like a scaredy-cat. At least that was only about him. This was because he caused someone else to get hurt. And not just anyone—

His father.

“All right, well, let’s get to it, then,” Archie said, handing Silas the nails. “Your job is to keep me in good supply so I don’t have to slow down. Got it?”

“Got it,” Silas said, grabbing a handful of nails from the toolbox and preparing to dispense them.

Just like that, Silas and Archie worked together to rebuild the fence. They moved down the row like an assembly line, with Silas handing over nails and Archie hammering them into the boards. Each nail that sank in made Silas feel just a little better. Doing something—anything—to help was better than sitting around feeling guilty. Especially when his dad was back to lying on the sofa again.

“This is where we used to keep the animals that your aunt rescued,” Archie said, nailing up another board. “Lions, zebras, hyenas, exotic birds of all kinds, even gophers.”

“I saw pictures my dad had,” Silas said, handing him a nail. “What happened?”

“Like I said, they were rescue animals. Your aunt ran an animal sanctuary. Not many places can take on those sorts of creatures. Scarlett rescued them from zoos that stopped running, mostly. A few came from overseas. Some were illegally traded to people who wanted pets.”

“A lion for a pet?” Silas said. Even he knew that was a terrible idea.

Archie nodded. “Well, not all folk are good to animals like your aunt. Specially when it comes to caring for nature’s most vulnerable creatures. Your aunt was truly one of a kind.”

“Where’d they all go?” Silas asked, scanning the empty pens. They were deserted, which gave the place a sad feeling, like a famine had come and dried up the Pride Lands.

He tried to imagine when animals like the ones from his books roamed through the enclosures, flourishing in herds and packs and delighting

visitors. He badly wished they were still here. He loved animals more than anything, the more exotic and wild, the better.

“After the camp shut down to campers,” Archie said, “the money to care for the animals dried up, too. Your aunt had to re-home them at other rescue sanctuaries. It was sad seeing the last zebras drive off in that trailer. Now Zazu is all that’s left.”

“Ah, Zazu,” Silas said with a smile. “He’s such a funny bird. Always cawing about something.”

Archie chuckled. “Yup, he was your aunt’s favorite. Never left her side. He was there when she died...” He trailed off, clearly choked up about it.

Silas wanted to know more about his aunt’s accident, but he knew not to press it. He’d learned how adults gave subtle signals about off-limits topics. Instead, he swept his gaze over the Pride Lands and asked something else. “Why’d the camp shut down?”

“Your aunt got tired, I reckon,” he said. “She started to act afraid all the time. She was jumpy and jittery, even spooked by the shadows. Something changed....”

Silas felt a jolt of dread. He’d always thought of his aunt as someone brave and fearless. She built a whole safari camp in the desert and rescued wild animals, after all.

What could possibly have scared her?

Silas forced the words out. “What was she afraid of?”

But Archie just patted his head dismissively. “Oh, grown-up stuff probably. Bills and taxes and regulations. Don’t worry about it, little cub. I’ve probably said too much.”

Silas wanted to ask more questions, but Archie led him over to a patch of shade where a cooler filled with ice held soda and bottles of water. Archie cracked open a water bottle and handed it to Silas. Then he patted the tree stumps for them to take a break in the shade.

The knotty trees weren’t lush and leafy like the ones back in Florida. They were jagged, with sharp needles and brown leaves. But they provided shade, and that was most welcome.

“Gotta stay hydrated out here,” Archie said, chugging his water and wiping sweat from his brow. “Or that sun will kill you, if the scorpions and rattlesnakes don’t first. Don’t get me started on the co-yotes and vultures. They’re scavengers waiting to pick off weaklings.”

Silas swallowed hard. “Lotta stuff around here seems to want to kill you. Do you think that’s what scared my aunt? Is that why she decided to shut down the camp?”

Archie reached for his staff, which had been leaning against one of the trees. The strange gourds jiggled as he grasped it. “Look, kiddo,” he said, leaning on the staff for support. “I’ll level with you. Ain’t nobody round here knows what got your poor aunt so spooked those last few years. You could say it’s a bit of a camp mystery. Like a lot of things.”

“But something had to scare her,” Silas persisted, frustrated by the lack of answers. “She loved the campers. This camp was like her baby. At least, that’s what my dad told me.”

Archie nodded. “Well, his guess is as good as mine. All I know is...she changed and got spooked...and now she’s gone...and it’s too late to bring her back.”

The whole mystery of his aunt’s last few years swirled through his head. Silas had so many questions. *Why did she shut down the camp? And send all the animals away? What spooked her so badly?*

He could think of so many dangers that lurked out here. But all he knew was one thing: nobody was telling him the whole truth.

“Is that really what’s on your mind?” Archie said thoughtfully. “Or is it something else?”

A heavy silence fell like a lead blanket. They gazed out over the campgrounds, which were sprawling and baking under the hot sun.

“You know what’s on my mind,” Silas said, feeling a terrible stab of guilt again. “It’s been on my mind for the last three days nonstop. It’s all I can think about now.”

“Ah, yes,” Archie said. “The fall?”

Silas felt like his dad was tumbling down all over again, just remembering it. It was a sickening, stomach-twisting feeling. He would do anything to make it stop.

“Yup,” he said in a soft voice. “My dad getting hurt is all my fault. And everyone is being so nice and telling me not to worry about it. That accidents happen.”

“*Hakuna matata?*” Archie said with a raised eyebrow. “The ole camp slogan, am I right?”

“Yeah, but they’re wrong. I don’t deserve it.”

“How do you figure that?” Archie looked taken aback. “They’re right. It was just a terrible accident. Nothing more. Despite what you think, it’s not your fault, little cub.”

But Silas shook his head. “You warned me not to find the Elephant Graveyard. You said it was too dangerous. But I didn’t listen. I was foolish and...it caused my dad to get hurt.”

“Unfortunately, we all make mistakes sometimes,” Archie said with a frown. “Nobody’s perfect. Even grown-ups like me. Heck, I made one by telling you about the Elephant Graveyard. Should’ve kept my mouth shut. That’s one of my weaknesses, I suppose.”

“No, I like how you tell me stuff. I’m tired of every-one ignoring me.” Silas wasn’t used to adults caring about what he thought, or checking on him. It felt refreshing.

Archie clutched his staff. “Has anyone told you the camp legend about this staff?”

Silas perked up. He studied the polished, knotted wooden staff crowned with the gourds.

“Nope, just that it belonged to my aunt. And that she carried it everywhere with her.”

“Well, nobody knows where it came from. She called it a *bakora*, and she had it before she founded the camp. Maybe she got it on some of her travels around the world, or maybe it was a gift. Regardless, legend has it that this staff has the power to summon the true spirit of Camp Pride Rock.”

“Really?” Silas said, gazing at it.

“Look at it closer,” Archie said, holding the staff up like it possessed magical powers. He waved it around in a dramatic gesture. “See anything?”

“Not yet,” Silas said, leaning closer.

“Look closer...it’s there,” Archie said.

Silas leaned even closer. Then—

Thump.

Archie tapped Silas on the head with the staff and broke into a grin.

Silas rubbed his head. “What was that for?”

“Do you feel the spirit now?” Archie said, chuckling at his prank. “How ’bout now?”

Thump. He thumped Silas again, this time on the shoulder. Silas giggled and swatted the staff away, only to be thumped on the back this time. Now they were both laughing.

“Feel the spirit?” Archie teased.

“Ha-ha, very funny,” Silas said, having fallen for the silly prank that he guessed his aunt must have played on many campers over the years.

But then Archie turned more serious. He clutched the staff tighter.

“All joking aside,” he said, “I fear the spirit has been gone for a long time. That’s the real reason campers stopped coming and business dried up. Scarlett’s whole life was dedicated to Camp Pride Rock, and when it fell into decline, she grew depressed and barely left her cabin.”

Silas took that in. “What happened to the spirit? Why did it go away?”

Archie frowned. “Nobody knows for sure. Some folks think your aunt locked the spirit away on purpose, because it had grown too powerful and dangerous....”

Silas swallowed hard. “Powerful and dangerous?”

Archie nodded but then waved the staff to dismiss the idea. “But don’t listen to me. That’s probably some superstitious nonsense cooked up by the townsfolk. I wish you could’ve seen the camp back then. But now your aunt is gone, and all I have left is her staff.”

“But maybe we could bring the spirit back?” Silas said. Finally, there was something he could do to help his dad. “That would help my dad and bring back campers, wouldn’t it?”

“Wouldn’t that be lovely,” Archie said with a nostalgic expression. Then he turned to Silas. “You know what, I think you should have this...it belonged to your aunt.”

He held out the staff, making the dangling gourds on the top dance and jiggle.

“Really?” Silas said, unsure. “You mean it?”

“Alas, I fear that I’ve failed your aunt. But maybe you can find a way to bring the camp spirit back to Pride Rock and restore it to its former glory.”

“Wait, are you sure?” Silas asked uncertainly. He didn’t feel deserving.

Archie nodded. “Your aunt would’ve wanted you to have this.”

With that, he bestowed the bakora on Silas. Silas felt awestruck as he accepted the gift and wrapped his fingers around the solid wood of the shaft. It was smooth, polished, and cool to the touch, despite the blazing midday heat scorching everything in sight.

Silas couldn’t wait to get back home and tell his dad all about the staff and how he found a way to bring the camp spirit back. His heart raced in anticipation. He ran his hands over the knotted wood, feeling every

indentation and swirl, all the way up to the strange gourds hanging from the top, which were dried out and hollow but still colorful despite their age.

Then suddenly—

He felt a jolt from the staff.

Like an electric shock. It traveled up the staff and shot through his whole body, as the staff seemed to pulse with unnatural ruby red light, like the light Silas had seen back on the first day in his room.

“What...was that?” Silas whispered, almost dropping it.

But Archie had already gone back to pounding nails into the boards. There was endless work to get the camp back in shape. He wanted to tell Archie, but when he looked back—

The staff had gone dark again.

No weird light. No tingling sensation.

It was just an ordinary staff. But Silas was sure that he’d felt something. Was that the camp spirit of Pride Rock that Archie was talking about? Or something else?

Archie said his aunt locked the spirit away because it had become too powerful and dangerous. As he clutched the staff, hairs stood up on the back of his neck from awe and fright at the same time, like when he read his books about deadly predators.

He studied the staff closer, looking for any clue, but nothing unusual happened. Maybe it was a trick of the hot sun reflecting off the polished wood, or maybe dehydration was getting to him. He chugged more water, feeling it slosh and gurgle around in his stomach.

But still Silas felt uneasy. Goose bumps freckled his skin, despite the sweltering heat. He tried to explain the strange occurrence away, but something was weird about this staff. He was sure of it, though he couldn’t prove it. The longer he held it, the more unsettled he felt.

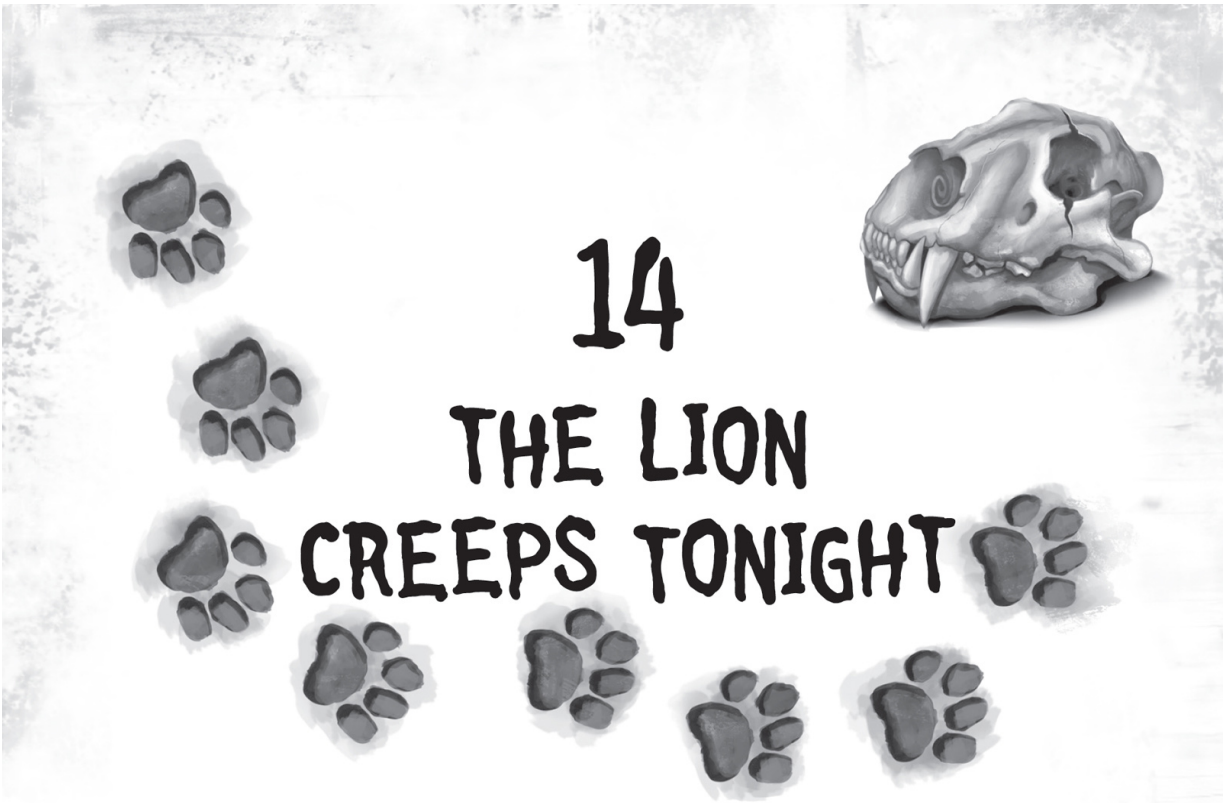
His heart skipped a beat, then raced faster. Maybe this was the answer to all their prayers, and the way that he could help his dad. He felt certain that the staff really had powers. His aunt must have known about it, too. That was why she carried it with her everywhere she went.

That wasn’t his imagination.

Nobody was going to believe him. But they would eventually.

For the first time since before they moved, Silas felt hopeful again. This staff was his chance to make everything better. He couldn’t wait to finish

helping Archie on the fences and get back home to examine the staff closer
—and find a way to bring the camp spirit back.



“Good night,” Silas said to his father, before escaping into his room for what he really wanted to do—investigate the staff and its strange powers.

“Night,” Dad said, giving him a halfhearted wave from the sofa. “Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

“Don’t you mean the...*scorpions*?” Silas said with an affected shudder. He wore his shoes inside now. “Mom said she found one in the kitchen this afternoon. It snuck inside.”

“Oh, I know,” Dad said. “Trust me, I heard her.”

He mimicked its scampering and giant stinger stabbing at unsuspecting toes.

“Mom said she screamed ‘bloody murder,’” Silas said, quoting her, though he thought that was a strange saying. “I’m surprised I didn’t hear it all the way down by Archie’s cabin. I was helping him with the fence.”

“Yup, I think my ears are still ringing,” Dad joked back. “I might have hearing damage.”

Silas laughed but then turned serious. “Well, they shouldn’t be coming into our house like that. My book says they’re venomous. They could sting us, or worse...the baby.”

“Actually if you think about it, we’re invaders in their territory,” Dad reminded him. “Not the other way around. They have more right to be here than we do.”

“Guess you’re right. Still, I don’t want them in the house.”

“Me neither. Soon as I’m feeling better, I’ll add *bug-proof the cabin* to my list.”

Yet another reminder that his dad was out of commission for the near future, all thanks to Silas and his foolish actions. However, he was determined to make it right.

He retreated to his bedroom and shut the door, then waited a few precious minutes to make sure everyone was sleeping. Dad flipped the lights out in the living room. Mom had gone to bed early with George, and he was sleeping for now, which wouldn’t last all night.

But the coast was clear. Silas shut off the light and grabbed his LED flashlight, another gift from Dad for their trip, along with a camping blanket, the hiking boots, and other survival stuff. It was all stuffed into a red hiking backpack that was waterproof and had a million pockets. Dad had been planning to take him and the twins camping next weekend, but then...

He got hurt.

Silas pushed that thought away. This was his chance to make it better.

Darkness fell over his room, aside from the flashlight’s eerie, bluish glow. He grabbed the staff, feeling its heft and weight, and crawled back onto his bunk. Dust rose with each movement, clouding the air and dancing like tiny ghosts in the flashlight beam.

He dug out his nature books, looking for anything in them that resembled the staff. But there was nothing. Next, he pulled out his phone and searched the internet. He also snapped a picture of the staff and sent it to Jose and Tamara, asking them for help researching it.

He waited for a response, but nothing popped up.

They were probably asleep already on East Coast time. He sighed, knowing that he wouldn’t hear from them until the morning. But he felt a little down.

When he first arrived, they'd texted nonstop, with him snapping interesting pictures of the camp and wildlife and his new friends, Timothy and Natasha, but it had fallen off.

He hadn't told them about what happened to his dad. He couldn't bear it and didn't want to dissuade them from visiting by scaring them into deciding it was too dangerous. Or worse, if their parents found out and forbade it.

A terrible cry echoed through the campgrounds....

Silas jumped and jerked his flashlight to the window, which was cracked open for fresh air. The coyotes were back. The curtains billowed gently in the soft breeze. The fan overhead whirred, as his parents said they didn't need the AC at night since it cooled down so much.

Outside, he thought he saw pairs of moonlit eyes glowing in the darkness. Were the coyotes creeping around their cabin? Trying to drown out their howls, he quickly jumped up and shut the window. That quieted their mournful cries but didn't silence them altogether. They were worse than George these days. The baby was finally sleeping for longer stretches at night, not waking every two hours.

Silas turned to the staff, trying everything to make it react again. He even tied a sheet around his neck like a cape and waved it around like a wizard, yelling, "Hocus pocus! Abracadabra! Do *something* already!"

But that did *nothing*.

Plus, it made him feel silly. He lowered the staff in shame. It had done some weird stuff that afternoon. But he had no idea what triggered it. He tried running his hands over it, begging it to...well...light up and bring the camp spirit back. But still, nothing unusual happened.

It was just a staff, after all.

He must have been imagining things. Maybe it was from the heat. His heart sank into his chest, and his stomach churned with that ever-present guilt. Why did he think the staff would fix everything?

He was being foolish, he realized. Everything in his world was too broken, just like his father's shattered leg, which, thanks to him, was now held together by pins, rods, and screws and encased in a thick cast. He feared that it might never heal completely.

With a deep sigh, Silas opened the closet, sliding the accordion door along its rusty hinges, and chucked the staff inside, where it landed with a *thud* next to the chest. Both were old, useless pieces of junk that once

belonged to his aunt. That was where they belonged—in the closet, and forgotten. He slid the door shut.

“Good riddance,” he whispered to the staff.

Then he fell into a restless sleep filled with that same nightmare where he kept falling into blackness with no end and no bottom, while coyotes sang like frightened children to the dark night. He tossed and turned, drenched with sweat, soaking the sheets.

He woke up with a start, crying out...

“No, Dad...please don’t fall...”

His voice came out a raspy whisper.

He’d been reaching for his dad’s hand to catch him, but he had been too late. His father slipped from his grasp and plunged into the abyss. It took him a moment to come back to the present and realize that it was only a terrible dream. It was still the middle of the night.

“Lousy dream,” Silas said, though he felt jittery and his heart still raced like he’d run a sprint. The room had grown horribly stuffy. He staggered over to the window and thrust it open again, letting in some fresh air. Then he flopped back down, hoping to return to sleep.

When suddenly—

Eerie red light flashed, flooding his room.

He sat up quickly, jerking his eyes back open.

“What was that?” he hissed.

But his room had fallen dark again. Right when he was about to lie back down, it happened once more. And this time he saw where it was coming from—

The closet.

The light leaked through the slats in the accordion door, casting an eerie glow across the floorboards. There was no mistaking it this time. It wasn’t only in his imagination.

Silas held his breath and waited for it to flash again.

But nothing happened.

Slowly, he crept out of bed, clutching his flashlight for protection. He triggered the beam, shining it around. He padded over to the closet and reached for the brass knob.

The coyotes started howling again, louder and closer this time. It sounded like they were right outside his window. The wind blew even harder, and the curtains billowed open.

Their voices yowled even louder now. Were they encouraging him—or warning him? Silas wasn't sure, but their shrill cries sent his heart racing in overdrive again.

And then—

Another animal took up the nightly chorus. But this one sounded different. While the coyote's calls reminded him of screaming children, this was more like cackling laughter.

"Heeeeeee-heee-heeeeeee-heeee."

That laughter was worse than the coyotes screaming.

What animal made that sound?

Silas reached out and opened the closet door.

He braced himself for...well...something. But the staff just lay there where he'd tossed it, next to the leather chest. He picked it up, examining it closer. Nothing about it seemed supernatural. It looked harmless. He waved the staff around for good measure.

A deep growling noise emanated throughout the room.

It was coming from...inside the chest.

"Stay back!" Silas yelled, waving the staff around for protection. The gourds bounced up and down. "I'm warning you! I have a magic staff...."

He shut his eyes, holding the staff in front of him, and cringed back.

But he heard no animal emerge from the closet.

Slowly, he peeled his eyes open. The closet was dark and silent. Even the coyotes and the strange laughing had fallen quiet, as if submitting to the apex predator in their midst.

Silas relaxed a little. It had been a long day working in the hot sun, not to mention the nightmares. He was probably hearing and seeing things again. But then—

The growling started up again.

It was deep and sonorous and powerful.

Had some creature snuck into the chest in his closet? But that was impossible. The chest was locked, not to mention that anything in there for too long would suffocate to death. Silas thought about waking up his dad for help, but his father needed to rest and recover.

"I have to be brave," he told himself. He remembered what his father said in their talk earlier. Bravery wasn't looking for danger, but what you did when danger came looking for you.

Well, danger had found him. He tried to slow his racing heart and held the staff out for protection...and approached the chest. It was still locked and shut tight. Next to the lock was the painted image of a baboon holding a staff that looked exactly like the one in his hands.

That was when he got an idea.

“*Hakuna matata*,” he said, touching the staff to the chest.

He felt that jolt rush through the staff. Suddenly, as if it had cast a magic spell, the lock unfastened and the chest sprang open. Silas couldn’t believe his eyes. He started back.

“Who’s...there?” Silas asked in a shaky voice.

But nobody answered.

He approached the chest slowly, holding out the staff, which had started to pulse with eerie red light, illuminating the closet. The closer he got to the chest, the brighter the staff grew.

Bracing himself, he peered inside the chest—

But it was empty.

Except for a dusty old lion pelt.

The chest smelled musty and dank, like it hadn’t been opened in a very long time. It made him sneeze all of a sudden. Once he recovered, he prodded the pelt with the staff, but it did nothing except release more dust into the air that made him sneeze again. Probably just something from his aunt’s travels. He felt silly for thinking that it could be dangerous.

He relaxed, still clutching the staff. The only strange thing, he realized, was the silence. The coyotes had stopped their howling. Usually they cried and sang all night long.

Silas relaxed, but then—

A growl escaped from the chest, along with a huff of warm breath...

Almost like the pelt was *breathing*.

Then slowly, with each breath, the pelt started to inflate and grow into the shape of a huge leonine creature with sharp teeth and claws, a thick, dark mane, and worst of all—

Glowing green eyes.

They fixed on Silas and then narrowed to slits. It growled low and menacingly, and then the ghostly lion spoke in an unusual voice. It was sultry and accented and quite proper.

“Oh, goody, someone finally released me!”



“Ah, free at last!” the lion said, stretching out, arching his back, and dusting himself off.

The pelt had expanded and filled out into the form of a grown, tawny lion with a black mane that was both regal and unkempt at the same time. He had a thin pink scar slashed over his left eye that gave him a sinister appearance. As did his eyes, which glowed with neon green light.

“About time, I’d say,” he went on in his lilting accent, preening and licking his paws, which tapered to razor-sharp claws. “It was getting rather stuffy in there....”

Silas couldn’t believe what he was seeing—and also hearing. He gaped at the lion, who loomed over him like a dark shadow. “No, that’s impossible...” he gasped.

With great precision, the lion’s green eyes fixed on Silas.

They narrowed sharply.

“Oh now, who do we have here?” he said in his lilting voice. “A tasty morsel? I am feeling quite famished. Been locked away for a lion’s age, I’d

say...or maybe an elephant's. How dreadful, don't you think?"

"No, this isn't real...it can't be," Silas said, pinching himself hard on the arm, sure that he was trapped inside another nightmare. Lions couldn't talk, and they didn't materialize out of old, dusty chests stuffed inside a closet. Not to mention his accented voice, which sounded both melodic and threatening at the same time, like something out of an old play.

"Oh, *real* is a matter of perspective," the lion mused, stroking his thick mane. "But I assure you I've got sharp teeth that can bite. Is that *real* enough for you?"

In a flash, the lion bared his razor-sharp teeth and snapped at Silas, transforming from diplomatic to predatory in an instant. Silas jumped back from the gnashing teeth, still clutching the staff. His heart leapt into his throat, while adrenaline shot through his body.

This couldn't be happening.

Without thinking, he thrust the staff up to ward off the attack.

"Stay away—don't hurt me!" he hissed at the lion.

"Oh, I quiver with fear," the lion said in a mocking voice, almost sounding offended. But then he snapped at Silas with his teeth—

The staff lit up, glowing with red light.

The lion yowled and cringed back from it. Silas looked down at the staff in awe. He could feel energy pulsing through the polished wood. Was it protecting him?

"That staff doesn't belong to you," the lion snarled at him. "Hand it over...now."

"No, stay back!" Silas said, holding it up. His heart hammered in his chest and his hands shook. But he swallowed his fear and thrust the staff out to fight off the lion.

"So rude," the lion said with a mournful shrug. "Someone should teach this cub some manners." With that, he pounced and slashed at Silas with his razor-sharp claws.

Silas dodged the blow—just barely.

They whizzed past his head.

But then the staff lit up—and this time, it hurled a bolt of red light at the lion, who howled in alarm and cringed away, clearly hurt by the shock.

Before Silas could do anything more, the lion snarled and slashed at him again, then sprang from the chest, shirking the pelt. His ghostly form shimmered with ruby light. He loped toward the open window. The ghost

leapt through it, slashing at the curtains and escaping into the dark night. The shredded material floated back down to flap over the window.

As soon as he had appeared, he'd vanished like a spirit into the dark of night.

The coyotes started howling again and grew louder, while the creepy laughter rang out, as if welcoming this fearsome predator back into their midst.

Silas was left alone with only the eerie chorus keeping him company. He still clutched the staff in his white knuckles. It had fallen dark again. The chest was thrust open in the closet. His heart hiccuped and thudded in erratic rhythm, making him shake with fear.

Silas shook his head.

The staff only looked like a plain wooden staff now. Nothing magical. He approached the chest and studied it closer now that he could see the inside. Strange images marked the interior, almost like cave drawings. The old lion pelt lay in the bottom, looking deflated and dried out, as if nothing had happened. The lifeless black eyes seemed to stare back him.

With a shudder, he shut the chest. The lock latched back into place. He slid shut the closet door, then slumped back on his bed. His mind whirled with everything that had just happened. But that was all his imagination, right? That was the only possible explanation.

He was always scared of everything, he reminded himself. It must have been a trick of light and shadow, set off by his imagination and that nightmare. A weird staff and a creepy old chest with a harmless pelt. His aunt had an active imagination—and so did he, apparently. Not to mention all the stress of his accident at the Elephant Graveyard and his dad falling.

But then he looked back at the curtains. Moonlight shimmered through the window and lit them up. They were slashed to ribbons, flapping gently in the night air.

A shiver shot up his spine.

If he was imagining all of it, how did he explain that?

He considered waking his father up and showing him the chest, the pelt, and the curtains just to double-check, but then thought better of it. His dad would never believe his story of a ghostly lion coming to life and attacking him. Plus, his dad needed rest so he could recover and heal. Even his friends Jose and Tamara would think he was seeing things that weren't there.

With an incredulous shake of his head, Silas climbed back into bed, clutching the staff at his side...just in case. He couldn't make sense of anything. His mind felt jumbled and overwhelmed, but also jittery and tired, too. It reminded him of dreams, where the logic only made sense when you were asleep, but then seemed outlandish once you woke back up.

Outside the cabin, the animal cries echoed through the Pride Lands and across the mesas, while the bright moonlight shone down on the desert, encouraging the wild song.

But then—

Something else stirred in the shadows outside the window.

Was somebody watching?

Silas didn't dare go investigate outside the cabin, not after what had just happened. Instead, he shivered even though the night was terribly warm and shrank down under the scratchy covers. Eventually, he fell into a restless sleep full of more broken dreams, pierced by snarls and growls and giggles and razor-sharp claws tearing at him and jagged teeth mauling him. He ran through the Pride Lands, trying to escape from the fearsome lion hunting him.

But he couldn't get away, no matter how hard he tried. He attempted to run faster, but it made no difference. He could hear the rustle of padded feet tearing through underbrush.

He glanced behind him—

The green eyes followed him, tracking his movements through the moonlit night, a fearsome predator after its prey. The lion galloped toward him and unfurled his claws.

But instead of snarls and growls, a strange, lilting voice reverberated out of his jowls.

“Good night, sweet prince!”

Then the lion lunged at Silas, his deadly claws extended and aimed at his neck—



“Noooooooo!” Silas yelled and woke in a cold sweat, clutching for his throat. As he blinked in the bright morning light filtering through the curtains, he slowly lowered his hands.

It was only a bad dream.

The sheets were damp and tangled around him, while the staff lay on the bed next to him. Memories of the previous night flashed through his head—the staff lighting up, the chest unlocking and popping open, the animal pelt and ghostly lion that had attacked him. He remembered how the staff protected him, and the ghostly lion escaped through the window.

The more he thought about it, the sillier he felt. Clearly, that wasn't real. It was a crazy dream, like all the other nightmares he'd been having lately. That was the only possible explanation. Ghost lions weren't real...and they certainly didn't talk.

And even if they did, no way they'd sound like a proper British gentleman, like the guy who narrated some of his favorite nature documentaries. His imagination was running wild.

Feeling better, though still exhausted from tossing and turning, Silas staggered out of his bed and poked his head into the living room, sure he'd woken up the whole house with his screaming. He expected to find his family. But the cabin remained quiet and empty.

That's weird.

He found a note on the kitchen counter that said they'd gone to the mess hall for breakfast. The end of it read *Didn't want to wake you. You need your rest. Love, Mom & Dad.*

Silas brushed his teeth, got dressed, and headed for the mess hall. He grabbed the staff, just in case. The wood felt heavy and cool to the touch. As he climbed the hill, kicking up sand with his boots, something about the camp felt *different*.

He couldn't explain it exactly. The buildings and grounds still needed a lot work, but something about it felt less run-down. Was the camp spirit back?

He pushed open the mess hall doors to breakfast aromas and happy chatter. Dad sat with his leg propped up on a pillow on the bench. His crutches rested next to him, and he bounced George on his good knee to keep him happy as Mom relaxed with her coffee. Milk dribbled from the baby's mouth. The twins were signing his father's cast with colorful pens. Dad seemed back to his old chipper self.

When Silas walked up to the table holding the staff, Dad broke into a wide grin. "Looks like somebody caught the camp spirit, huh? That belonged to your aunt Scarlett."

"Archie gave it to me," Silas said, looking around for the groundskeeper.

But he wasn't there. That was strange.

"Well, it belongs in the family," Dad said, patting the empty spot next to him. Silas slid onto the bench. "Your aunt carried that staff everywhere she went."

"Yup, and Zazu used to perch on it," Timothy said. "It was his favorite spot."

"Best thing for healing...a hearty breakfast!" Sara proclaimed, hurrying out of the kitchen and depositing food on the table, including a full platter of steel-cut oatmeal, homemade biscuits, and green chile scrambled eggs with cheese, all served family style.

Stealthily she slipped Silas and the twins some homemade waffles with fresh maple syrup. “Kid’s got a sweet tooth,” Sara said merrily. “Just like my little minions over there.”

The whole atmosphere felt lighter and happier than it had since the accident. His father was back from the hospital, for one thing. Silas got his turn to sign the cast, scrawling his name and *Best Dad Ever*.

But is there more to it? Silas thought in excitement, clutching the staff tighter. Maybe bringing back the camp spirit was working after all.

The doors burst open.

Archie strode in. He had a strange expression on his face, almost like he was hiding something. But it quickly vanished, replaced with a big smile.

“Good morn,” he said, tipping his hat. “Got caught up repairing that fence out back.”

“The one by the animal pens?” Silas asked, clutching the staff like a totem. “Behind our cabin? But we already fixed it yesterday...didn’t we?”

“Yup, the same one,” Archie said with a frown. “Can’t explain it, but something big tore it down. I found footprints, too. Too big to be a co-yote.”

“What do you think it was?” Dad asked. He clutched George tighter, and Mom squeezed his shoulder as worried murmurs rippled through the conversation.

Archie tipped his hat back and scratched his head. “Whatever it was, it was awfully large. Maybe a black bear...or a mountain lion.”

“A mountain...*lion*?” Silas asked warily, remembering the chest and the lion. Was that what he saw the night before? But that was impossible...that wasn’t real...or was it?

“Well, tons of critters live up in these mesas,” Archie said. “All the more reason to secure the fencing. You gonna be my helper again?”

“Yes sir,” Silas said, covering his fear and tapping Archie playfully on the shoulder with the staff, making Archie roll his eyes. “Feel the Camp Pride Rock spirit?”

“Taste of my own medicine, huh?” Archie said, rubbing his arm with a chuckle.

The twins giggled.

“Don’t worry,” Dad said, digging into breakfast and shoveling eggs and bacon into his mouth. “I’ll be out of this cast and up and about in no time. Just a minor delay, that’s all. And we’ll repair the rope bridge first thing. I was wondering...how did it snap like that?”

The groundskeeper shook his head and looked bewildered. “Can’t exactly explain it,” he said with a frown. “Last time I checked it, the ropes were solid. But it’s been a while, I guess.”

That strange expression flashed over Archie’s face again—almost like he was hiding something. Silas felt a surge of energy through the staff, too.

Was it trying to tell him something?

But he shook it off. He was just being paranoid after the previous night’s nightmares and not getting much sleep. Besides, for once, everything felt like it was going to work out okay. Why did he always have to look for something that was wrong, or find things to be afraid of?

Today will be different, he promised himself as he forked up the delicious waffles. It would be filled with yummy food, fun adventures, and lots of *hakuna matata*.

* * *

“Time to get our sweat on,” Archie said after breakfast, holding the doors open for everyone. They all headed out back to help Archie work on repairs for the camp.

Even Mom joined, leaving George behind in Sara’s capable care.

“I raised two babies at once,” Sara cooed to the swaddled baby, bouncing him in her arms and making him burp. “One tiny bundle of joy, I can handle...now go on and shoo!”

Silas basked in his mother’s renewed attention, something he hadn’t experienced since...well...his baby brother came along. He couldn’t remember the last time she let George out of her sight. Sara had accomplished a minor miracle.

They worked to repair the derelict fencing, with Silas and the twins passing nails while Archie and Mom hammered the stubborn boards back into place. Dad watched from a chair set up in the shade with his leg propped up, yelling out directions and encouragement. Zazu perched on the staff, which was leaning up against a tree stump nearby. “*Arhhhh, hammer...harder*,” he cawed, repeating every instruction that Dad called out to them.

Dad sounded chipper and upbeat enough, but Silas could tell that he was frustrated that he couldn’t do more to help out right now. Silas felt that

familiar churning guilt in his stomach, but pushed back against it. “*Hakuna matata*,” he whispered to himself. “No worries.”

Once they got the fence repaired, they started to lay out fresh gravel on the hiking trails that snaked throughout the Pride Lands. They were all sweating hard and were tired, but there was so much work left to do. Rafi came down to check on Dad’s leg and pitch in, but even with all that help, repairing the camp was going to take years.

Silas felt defeated thinking about it all. How were they going to get it open for campers by next summer? His dad always got excited about ideas, but he didn’t always think about how much work was actually involved in them. He’d heard his parents argue about it on several occasions, mostly when Mom got frustrated. They were opposites that way.

Mom was usually the pragmatic and realistic one, while Dad was the optimist and always looking at the bright side. Silas supposed he was a strange mixture of them both.

“Fresh lemonade,” Sara called, ferrying out plastic pitchers stuffed with ice and homemade lemonade sweetened with local honey. She handed out cups, while George slept in the baby carrier in the shade. Sara really did have a way with babies.

“Barely cried,” Sara reported. “Took that bottle you left us like a champ. Milk hangover,” she laughed, gesturing to the sleepy expression, milk mustache, and dribble on his chin.

“What’s next?” Dad asked.

Archie sipped on a tall glass of lemonade and frowned, thinking it over. “The huts for the campers all need new thatching on the roofs, plus a good cleaning inside the cabins.”

“And the siding?” Dad asked.

“It can probably hold out a few more seasons. But it needs a fresh coat of paint.”

“Right, doesn’t everything around here?” Dad said in a wry voice, sounding worried about how much work there was left. He scanned all the buildings with peeling paint.

Archie nodded. “Unfortunately. The sun bleaches everything. Nothing lasts long in the desert.” They were doing their best to speed through the repairs, but it was slow going.

Silas felt worry and guilt churning again, but then he clutched the staff, with Zazu perched on the top. He wasn’t sure if it was his imagination, or

the parrot jiggling it, but he felt a jolt.

Then something special happened—

The sound of cars driving up the dirt road reached their ears. A caravan of vehicles started pulling into the campground parking lot, old pickup trucks, sedans, minivans, and more. Then folks started climbing out of the vehicles. They carried toolboxes, shovels, and paint cans.

It was all the folks from town, including Billie the gas station attendant. They headed toward them, walking up the trail with fresh gravel. Dad struggled to his feet, balancing on one leg and hopping toward them on his crutches. He exchanged shocked looks with Mom and Archie.

“How is this happening?” he asked in bewilderment.



The locals made their way up to the shady patch where Silas and his family and friends were taking a lemonade break. Dad looked shocked to see them all coming down the trail. “What’re they doing here?”

“Guessing news travels fast in these parts,” Archie said with a conspiratorial wink. “And perhaps somebody called them. They came to help out with the repairs.”

Rafi grinned. “Sounds like Sara’s handiwork. She’s always up to something.”

The cars kept coming from town, filling up the parking lot. It turned out that many of the townsfolk were former campers who had wonderful memories of Camp Pride Rock and Scarlett. They heard about the accident and came to pitch in and help out until Dad felt better.

But Silas had his own theory about why everyone was showing up to help the camp—and it wasn’t a phone call from Sara. It was the staff. He tightened his grip on it, knowing that it was the real reason for this lucky turn of events. *It restored the camp spirit*, he thought with enthusiasm.

Even Zazu was excited—he cawed as he perched on it.

A tall woman with long white hair and dark skin introduced herself as Dakota White Horse. “It would be a great blessing if Camp Pride Rock reopened next summer,” she said, shaking Dad’s hand. “Good for the town, too. It’s not been the same since it closed.”

A group of teenagers followed after her, who turned out to be her kids and nieces and nephews. “And great for the next generation,” she added with a smile.

Silas spotted the familiar face of Billie from the gas station. She climbed out of her dusty white van. He still had a bad feeling about her. Billie shifted her gaze to Silas. She glanced at the staff clutched in his hand, then narrowed her eyes and frowned.

Silas felt a deep chill—*he didn’t trust her*.

He didn’t know why, but she gave him the creeps.

“Oh, look, there’s Billie,” Timothy said, spotting the concerned look on Silas’s face. “Don’t worry about her. She means well, but she has a funny way of showing it.”

“Yeah, you can say that again,” Silas said with another shudder. “She told me bad things happen to folks who live up here. What do you think she meant by that?”

“Who knows?” Natasha said, exchanging looks with Timothy—like special twin language—and then shrugging. “Too much time in the desert can make you superstitious.”

“She also said, ‘Outsiders don’t last long in the desert,’” he added in a low voice. “And I’ve noticed her van around the campgrounds a lot. She almost ran me over the other day....”

“Just superstitious nonsense,” Natasha said. “Don’t think nothing of it.”

“Yeah, she’s harmless,” Timothy said. “She helps Mom out with deliveries. That’s why she’s always up in the Pride Lands. And between deliveries in town and the gas station, she’s always in a rush and busy. See all those dents on her van? They didn’t get there on their own.”

The twins giggled. But Silas didn’t feel cheered up.

Plus, he got the feeling that they weren’t telling him everything. He wondered if Billie was talking about his aunt’s accident when she said “bad things happen.” He still had no idea how Aunt Scarlett had died...just that it was sudden. Before Silas could press the twins any more, Archie stood up and started putting everyone to work.

“All right, stop lollygagging in the shade and let’s get our hands dirty,” Archie proclaimed. He gestured to Silas and the twins and the teens. “That means you, too.”

“Don’t let the outsiders slack off,” Billie said, and not in a friendly way.

“Hush up and stop your grouching,” Archie said, shooting her a chastising look. “They’re not outsiders—they’re family. Everyone chips in around here. Just how Scarlett would want it.”

Billie didn’t say anything else—but she also didn’t look convinced. Her gaze lingered on Silas a little too long as he grabbed a shovel and followed Archie toward the piles of gravel.

* * *

Silas shoveled gravel until his arms ached, and then he shoveled some more. Everyone was pitching in all across the Pride Lands, painting the buildings, repairing the thatching on the roofs of the huts, mending fences, and re-graveling the hiking trails and roads.

Silas set his shovel down and grabbed the staff, heading for the shady patch by Archie’s shed to grab some water. Sweat trickled down his face, stinging his eyes. He wiped it away and fished a cold bottle out of the red-and-white cooler, which was filled with ice and drinks.

Whispered voices reached his ears.

The staff pulsed, as if warning him.

Silas felt a jolt.

Intrigued, he poked his head around to the back of the groundskeeper’s shed. Three figures were huddled in the shadows, talking in low voices.

“Business hasn’t been the same since the camp shut down,” the first person complained. “You know that. We’re in big trouble.”

It was Billie—he recognized her voice.

“The camp is the lifeblood of the town...the Pride Lands...it’s everything.”

That was Archie.

Silas felt his breath catch in his throat. Who was the third person? He stayed hidden and tried to listen in, picking out bits and pieces, though it was hard to hear it all. But then the scent of cinnamon and waffles hit his nose—it was Sara. What was she doing there?

“Lifeblood...” Billie said. “You mean the blood that was spilled on this land?”

“Come on...you know what happened to Scarlett was a terrible accident, nothing more,” Archie said in a sharp voice. “Don’t go around spreading rumors and scaring folks.”

“Ole Scarlett was one of our own,” Billie said. “We adopted her—or maybe she adopted us,” she added with a chuckle. But then she darkened. “But I can’t say the same for her family. Newcomers don’t belong here—and you know it. They won’t last in the desert. Outsiders shouldn’t be running the camp. Scarlett promised us. It should be one of us—”

“Oh, stop already,” Sara interrupted. “Billie, relax and enjoy yourself for once. You said the same thing ’bout Scarlett at first, before she proved you wrong. Isn’t that right?”

“Scarlett was different, and you know it,” Billie said, not sounding convinced. “And now, there’s another terrible accident in the Pride Lands. Sounds like the place is cursed—”

“Hush up already,” Archie said, cutting her off. “Stop causing trouble. If bad rumors get out, it could ruin everything for us and scare away the campers...this time for good.”

A great fluttering of wings exploded next to him. It was Zazu. The parrot took off from the staff and flew at them, cawing loudly in alarm.

“Beware the arch...danger...danger...keep out!”

Their eyes snapped to Silas. He cringed back, feeling his cheeks flush. They’d caught him eavesdropping on them. Zazu flew at Billie, who glared at the parrot.

“Can’t someone shut that bird up?” Billie snapped, glaring first at Zazu and then at Silas.

The way Billie said that gave Silas a bad feeling. Sara quickly hurried over, summoning the twins, who caught Zazu and took him back home. But the whole way back, the parrot kept flapping his wings and cawing the strange warning. What did it mean?

He also wasn’t sure what to make of Sara and Archie talking to Billie. Clearly, they were all friends with a long history at the camp. But if they trusted Billie, did that mean she was okay?

All he knew was Zazu clearly didn’t like her.

He would have to keep a closer eye on her.

* * *

That night Sara cooked a big supper for everyone in the mess hall, which echoed with jovial laughter and chatter. With all the former campers and their kids, the hall was filled to the brim for the first time in a long time. She plopped the platters down with a flourish.

"It's just like back in the old days," Timothy said in a cheerful voice, loading his plate up with mashed potatoes and spicy grilled chicken.

"Jeez, you make it sound like we're a million years old," Natasha said, buttering her cornbread. "That was, like, two years ago. Remember?"

"That's when the camp shut down?" Silas asked, piecing together the time frame.

Timothy nodded. "Well, fewer campers came every year, and then...it shut down."

Silas felt his heart leap as he stroked the staff propped up next to him against the table. He patted it thankfully. "Well, now that the camp spirit is back, I'll make sure the camp gets up and running again."

He scanned the packed tables, recognizing some of the townsfolk from their pictures on the walls standing by Aunt Scarlett. His parents looked around the room with nostalgic expressions.

This could be their future.

Dad stood up, wobbling on one leg, even though Mom shot him a warning look. He tapped his water glass with a fork to make a toast. Gradually the chatter dried up.

"The accident was a blessing in disguise," he said, raising his glass and sweeping his gaze around the room at the eclectic crowd gathered there. "It brought everyone back together. I'm so grateful for all the help. I guess sometimes bad things happen for good reasons."

"*Hakuna matata!*" came the enthusiastic response as everyone clinked their glasses together. Silas toasted with the twins. "To Camp Pride Rock!" They giggled.

Basking in the glow from a day of hard work, where they'd made a ton of progress repairing the camp, and now enjoying a feast in the crowded mess hall, Silas had forgotten all about the weird chest and the ghostly lion. Instead, he focused on one thing: *The camp spirit is back*, he thought, *and all thanks to the staff.*

Everything was getting better. Dad was already healing and more mobile, despite Mom's trying to keep him still. Better yet, with the help of the townsfolk that day, they even repaired the rope bridge. Now it was stronger and safer than ever before. In fact, suddenly it felt like everything in his life was about to get fixed up like new. Actually, better than new. For the first time since their cross-country move, Camp Pride Rock started to feel like...*home*.

With that cheerful thought, Silas volunteered to help Sara and the twins clean up. The townsfolk had already left, starting the long trek back down to town, while Mom, Dad, and George headed back to the cabin. Dad needed extra time to make the walk with his crutches, and George needed to get plenty of sleep, of course. Otherwise how would he have the energy to wake up crying at the top of his lungs later that night?

Silas wiped down the tables and swept the floors, then poked his head into the kitchen, where the twins and Sara were finishing up. He wanted to say good night. They lived in the apartment attached to the back of the mess hall. It turned out that the twins had even grown up there.

"Careful getting back home," Sara said in her motherly way. "It's dark out there."

Silas held up the staff and his LED flashlight.

"Oh, don't worry!" he said with a wink. "I came prepared."

He caught sight of his reflection in the dark windows. He almost didn't recognize himself with the flashlight and staff—and no fear in his eyes. He looked strong and brave. Something about Camp Pride Rock had changed him for the better. He wasn't a scaredy-cat anymore.

With that, he left the mess hall, the doors snapping closed behind him on their springs. The sun had set fully, and the moon was waning, so the night had turned darker. Though it had been sweltering during the day, without humidity, a chill had quickly taken hold of the air.

He shivered as he walked, shining the flashlight ahead of him. The bluish beam bounced with each step. His boots clapped against the freshly laid gravel. The trail was so much clearer and easier to walk. No more sinking into sand. He felt good that their hard work had paid off.

He scanned the Pride Lands, but they were blanketed in thick darkness. He could see little beyond his flashlight's glow. A million stars twinkled like tiny diamonds overhead, while the barest sliver of moon sank behind the flat-topped mesas.

He was about halfway back to the cabin when he heard loud rustling in the underbrush. He felt *warm breath* waft over his neck and heard the crunch of gravel.

He jumped away and jerked around with the flashlight just in time to see a quick flash of green eyes and tawny fur. But then it quickly darted away and slunk back into the shadows.

Something was out there—was it the mountain lion?

His heart hammered into his throat, while his breath caught. He scanned the darkness, flicking the beam around, but he couldn't see the lion anywhere. That was a bad sign.

Behind him on the other side of the trail, more sounds echoed from the bushes. Silas jerked his flashlight around, catching sight of three dark shadows scampering out of sight.

Silas froze with fright and stared at them.

These creatures looked about the size of large dogs and had spiky fur on their backs. Their eyes glowed in the flashlight beam—*bright green*—before the creatures disappeared, scattering off into the shadows.

What are they? he thought in a panic.

Silas knew one thing—he didn't want to wait around and find out. He increased his pace, fueled by adrenaline and fear. But the faster he went, the more rustling he heard behind him.

They were tracking him...stalking him...and they were smart.

He whipped the flashlight around, trying to catch them in the light and scare them off, but they made sure to stay out of the beam this time. They'd learned. That freaked him out even more. His heart thumped faster and faster, screaming at him—

Run.

Silas broke into a sprint, clutching both the staff and flashlight for protection. The fresh gravel crunched under his boots. But the rustling noises followed him, and then something else.

“Idiots...what are you waiting for...get him!”

The commanding yet genteel voice echoed out from the underbrush. Silas whipped around, shining the flashlight. Something scampered over the gravel behind him.

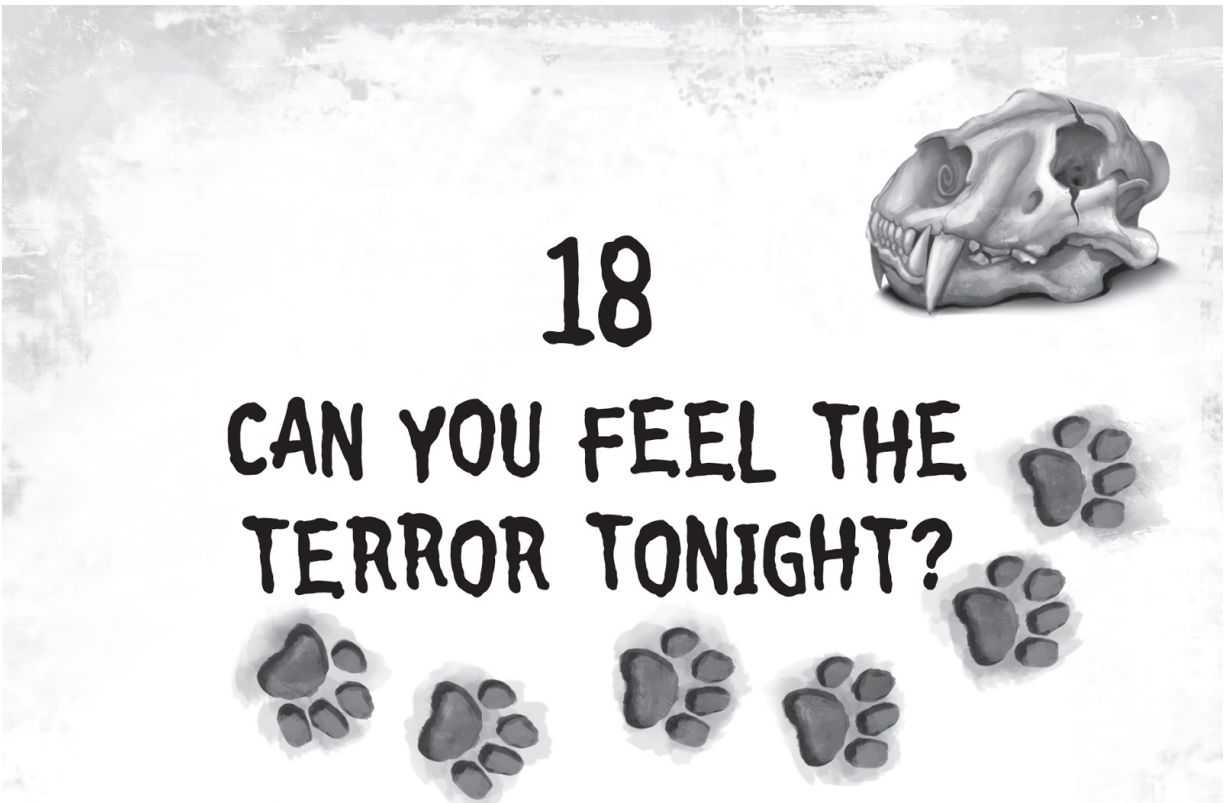
Then he heard it—and it brought chills to his skin.

“Heeee...heeee...heeee...”

That eerie laughter peppered the darkness.

Silas turned around and noticed the shadows moving faster and faster. It was as if the command that echoed out of the darkness had driven them into a murderous frenzy.

They were coming straight for him!



The dark shadows stalked after him, their chuckling echoing in the darkness. Silas ran faster, his boots tearing into the fresh gravel. The laughter sounded right behind him now...and he thought that there were three of them.

“Heee-heee-he-he-heeeeeee!”

“No, stay away!” he yelled, brandishing the staff, which remained dark and lifeless.

Wasn’t it supposed to protect him?

But clearly he didn’t know how to work it right. Then he had a worse thought—what if these creatures were part of the spirit he’d awoken when he opened that chest? He remembered the ghostly lion coming to life and attacking him, then escaping through the open window.

But none of that was real—was it?

Confusion roiled through his brain, sloshing around and mixing with his terror. He thought that his heart might explode from fright. He tried to run faster.

The cabin lay just ahead. He only had a little bit farther to reach safety. The porch light—left on by his parents, who had probably already gone to bed—illuminated the area.

“Heee-heee-he-he-heeeeeee!”

Their laughter chased him just as much as their teeth and claws. But he didn’t know where they were exactly, which was much worse. Their giggles bounced around the canyon, obscuring their location. But he could hear rustling in the underbrush next to the path.

He felt something swipe at his legs, and he leapt to the right, nearly falling flat on his face. He caught his balance...just twenty more feet to go...

He dashed into the halo cast by the porch light, then pounded up the stairs and thrust open the front door. He ran through it, then glanced back just in time to see—

Three sets of preternatural green eyes.

They were glowing just outside the reach of the porch light. He could imagine the creatures’ fearsome jaws and sharp teeth, not to mention their razor-like claws.

But he didn’t wait for them to step into the light. He shut and bolted the front door, then leaned against it. His breath came out in raggedy gasps, while his chest heaved with each breath as his heart struggled to pump enough oxygen into his body. He felt sick and dizzy.

He turned around, expecting his mother or father to be waiting for him with a stern expression and scolding for slamming the door and waking them up. But the cabin was dark and quiet. Silas felt let down, but he wasn’t surprised. Sure enough, Dad was fast asleep, snoring away on the sofa with his leg propped up, while the master bedroom door was shut tight, with the white noise machine whirring away to insulate the baby from any potential noise.

He heard it again.

“Heee-heee-he-he-heeeeeee!”

The door muted the laughter, but didn’t silence it.

The shrill giggles echoed out. He whipped around, feeling flush with fear, and backed away from the door, clutching the staff. But it seemed feeble protection in the face of those fearsome predators. Plus, it hadn’t lit up or defended him like before.

He didn't know what was real or what was imagined anymore, and—worse—he feared that he might be losing his mind. But as he stood there listening to their horrid giggles, he was certain of one thing. Those creatures weren't in his imagination. They were really out there.

And they'd been hunting him.

That made his pulse race, not just from the physical exertion but from the terror that pooled inside his chest and squeezed at his heart. With his heart thumping maniacally, Silas hurried back to his room and closed the door. Despite the heat, he double-checked that the window was shut tight. He could still hear them out there taunting him.

They sounded like something out of Jose's collection of spooky movies. However, he remembered that there was only one animal that made that type of sound.

"But that's impossible," Silas whispered. His mind raced with the implausibility. He grabbed his wildlife books, thumbing through them, coming to a stop on one page—

"Hyenas."

He felt fear ripple through him as he scanned the colorful spread filled with pictures of the spotted creatures with bristled fur that stood up along their backs, and sharp claws and teeth.

He read the description. They were scavengers and hunters who picked off the injured and weak, the easiest prey. *Kind of like me*, Silas thought in horror as he scanned the pages. But despite their reputation for scavenging, they were considered highly dangerous, even to grown adults. They were nocturnal, meaning they came out at night. They were also highly intelligent.

Silas remembered how they learned to stay out of the light and stick to the shadows. They hunted in packs, working to confuse and disorient their prey. They could bring down quarry many times their size, like water buffalo. He got to the part about their cries, which were described as "high-pitched giggles."

He looked up from the book, feeling disturbed. The more he read about them, the more he was certain those were the creatures who had chased him back to the cabin. But one fact completely stumped him. They weren't native to North America. He confirmed that in the book.

According to *Predators*, they primarily lived throughout most of Africa and eastward into the Middle East and India. Those were different

continents, all the way across the ocean.

But Silas was certain—that was what he had heard and seen.

If he was right, then what were they doing in Arizona?

He shut the book, feeling totally creeped out. He remembered that his aunt had apparently rescued hyenas. Maybe they escaped from the camp? But wouldn't somebody have gone after them or caught them by now? The more he thought about it, the more confused he felt.

The lion he had seen escape from the chest wasn't a mountain lion, which was native to the area. It was far too large and had a black mane, unlike the North American mountain lions—also known as cougars or pumas—which, according to his book, were more closely related to smaller felines like bobcats than to their larger African counterparts.

And neither species had *glowing green eyes*.

He felt freaked out even remembering them peering out of the darkness at him. It seemed like something out of a terrible nightmare. Only everything that had happened felt so real. But another thing nagged at him. He feared that nobody would believe him.

Regardless, he decided to ask Archie the next day and find out more about the hyenas rescued by his aunt. The groundskeeper had taken a special interest in him, and always found a way to make him feel better, no matter what. He was one grown-up Silas trusted.

Feeling better with that thought, Silas crawled into bed with the staff, and eventually fell into a restless sleep filled with terrible nightmares. In them, he ran through the Pride Lands in the dark while the ghostly lion stalked after him, aided by the hyenas, hunting in a pack. The lion promised to take him down, while the hyenas would pick over what was left of his body.

Silas tried to run faster, but he was no match for the lion's speed and agility. The hyenas worked together, corralling him and herding him into a dead end in a canyon. But the lion took the lead. His green eyes pierced through the darkness as he pounced at Silas—

Silas woke up with a terrible start. He was in his bedroom, twisted in his sheets. It was only another bad dream...but then he saw the staff was pulsing with red light. Then he heard it—

“Grrrrrrrrr...”

A low growling sound emanated through his dark room.

He jerked his gaze to the closet.

It was coming from inside.

Slowly, the accordion door slid open of its own volition, one section at a time. *Creak. Snap. Creak. Snap. Creak. Snap.* The frame squealed and protested with each jerk.

The gap in the door grew wider with each movement.

“No, this isn’t real,” Silas gasped. “Closets don’t open on their own....”

But then he saw it.

Two green eyes glowed out of the darkness, fixed right on him. They narrowed as the ghostly lion slowly slunk out of the closet, his paws padding softly on the wooden floor. Silas thought about running for it, but the lion stood between him and the door. Maybe he could climb through the window—but then the hyenas’ shrill giggles exploded again, right outside his room.

He was trapped.

“No, stay away!” he stammered. “My dad will wake up—and protect me.”

He added that last threat, even though he knew it was a bluff. His father was incapacitated with a broken leg—and certainly no match for a full-grown lion.

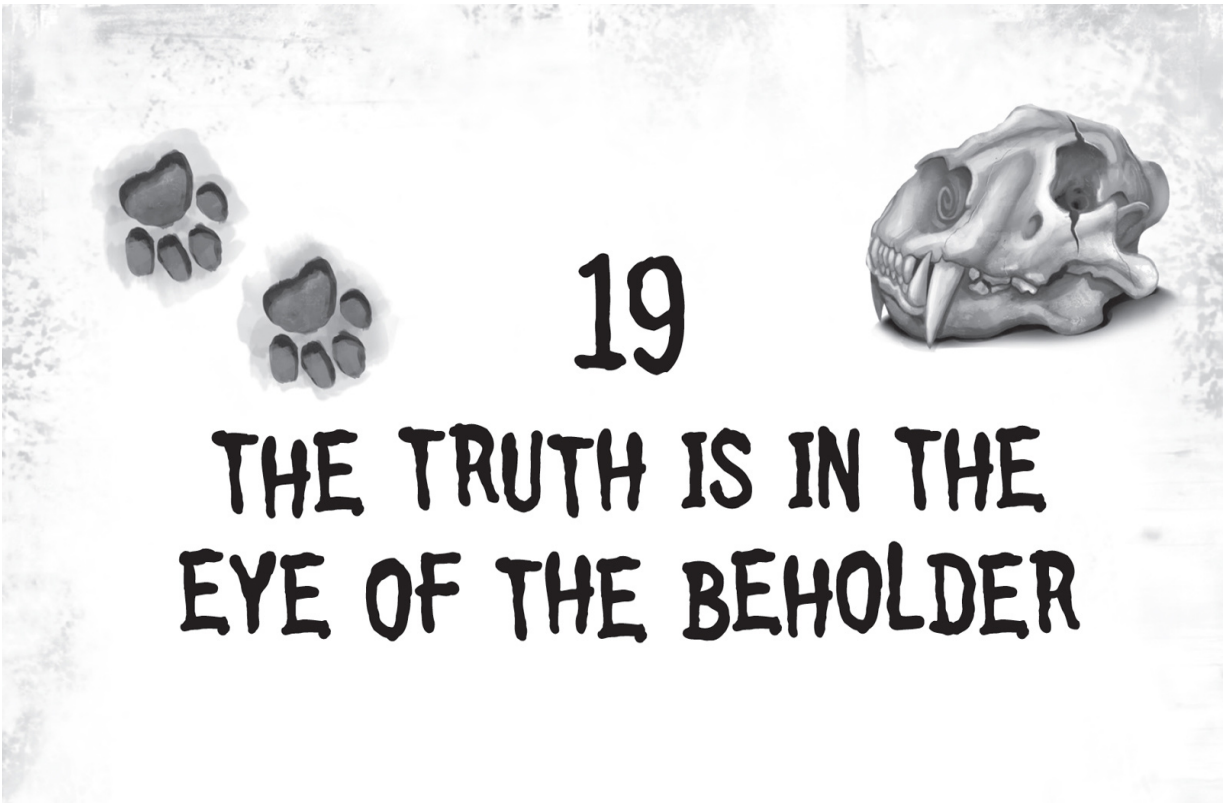
Especially a...ghost lion.

“Oh, is he the king of the Pride Lands now?”

It was the same smooth, lilting, accented voice. The lion was talking again. Weirder still, he sounded calm and almost gentlemanly. His dark, ghostly form lurked back in the shadows, no less terrifying. Especially with those terrible, glowing emerald eyes.

Silas shrank back in terror. “Yessss...he is....”

The lion snarled in anger and crouched back, simmering with barely contained rage. “I should be the king undisputed...not your father! That staff belongs to me!” With that terrible proclamation, the lion pounced at Silas, his claws stabbing through the sheets.



The fearsome voice tore through his room, while the claws cut through the thin linens, slicing them into ribbons. Silas lurched awake, grabbed for the staff, and thrust it out...

“No, don’t hurt my dad!” he gasped.

But nothing was there.

His room was empty. The closet door was shut tight, and so was the window. On top of that, it was already morning. Bright sunlight crept through the drapes, slanting across the floor.

But his heart still raced like he had been running a marathon, not like he’d been tucked into bed fast asleep. He could still remember the terrible voice, so diplomatic and polished, yet so menacing.

Then he heard something—

Coming from the hall.

He held the staff tighter and thrust it out for protection. Was the ghostly lion back? His heart beat rapidly, making him feel jittery. He strained his ears and listened, holding his breath.

Then he heard it again.

The soft thumping in the hall grew louder....

Hop, thump...hop, thump.

It was coming for him! A second later, a loud rap came from the door. Then it pushed open on its own, revealing a dark shadow with four legs standing in the hall!

Silas raised the staff in defense.

“No, stay away! Don’t hurt me!” he yelled at the shadow.

But it was just his father who stood in the doorway. The extra legs were only his crutches. He looked concerned, but also a bit amused by the dramatic display.

“Uh, everything okay in here?” he asked, leaning on his crutches. He looked a bit haggard, as if woken from a deep slumber. His cast stretched all the way to his thigh, but now it looked colorful and fun with all the signatures and messages in multicolored ink.

Silas realized that his father must have heard his screaming from his nightmare. He felt a bit sheepish. He lowered the staff slowly, feeling his cheeks flame in embarrassment.

“Yeah, sorry...just a bad dream.”

“Thought so, kiddo. If it makes you feel better, adults have them sometimes, too.”

“Wait, you do?” Silas said in surprise.

Contrary to making him feel better, the idea rattled him to his core. Adults like his father always acted so much braver than Silas felt on the inside. He had no idea that grown-ups could be scaredy-cats and have terrible nightmares, too. He had assumed that it was something you grew out of when you got older, like sugary cereal, skateboarding, or watching cartoon movies. The idea that this could be his fate for the rest of his life... well...stressed him out, of course.

But what else was new?

“How about this? I’ll make you a deal,” Dad said, spotting the apprehensive look on his face. “Next time you have a bad dream like that, come get me and wake me up. Okay?”

“Uh, even if you’re asleep?” Silas asked. He hated bothering his parents. His dad needed rest to heal, and the baby barely let him or Mom get any shut-eye. “And snoring and drooling?”

“Especially then,” Dad said with a chuckle. “That way we can face it together,” he added as his expression softened. “I’ll always be here to protect you, even if I’m on crutches.”

He held them up and did a silly little dance, which, along with his reassuring words, melted away the fear and anxiety like some kind of fatherly magic spell. Silas felt better.

“Thanks, Dad—” he started. But then...

“*Wahhhh...wahhhh...wahhhh!*”

The piercing cries cut through the house, rising and falling like the siren blaring from an ambulance. How could someone so tiny make so much noise? Silas chalked it up to one of the universe’s great mysteries, along with what Stonehenge was really for. But it did reinforce his secret theory that, much like Stonehenge, his baby brother might be alien in origin.

“Uh-oh, looks like we woke up the...*wahh-mbulance*,” Dad said with a grimace. He rubbed his temples. “I’d better go check on your mother and little brother.”

Silas laughed as his dad’s cheesy joke. Almost nothing helped him shake his fears, except his dad...and bad jokes, he decided. Those were by far the best medicine.

Dad turned around using his crutches, then shut the door and headed down the hall. The distinctive *hop, thump...hop, thump* could be heard even through the door. His footsteps grew softer. George kept bawling his head off, but then those cries grew quieter, too.

Dad had the magic touch. He could chase away frightening nightmares and soothe crying babies, like some kind of fatherly superhero. Only his jokes weren’t nearly as good as Tony Stark’s. In that department, Iron Man had him beat.

Silas smiled to himself, then sank back into his bed. He wasn’t afraid anymore, but he still felt exhausted, like he hadn’t slept a wink...which was probably the case. The sheets were all twisted and tangled, too. That nightmare probably had him thrashing around.

Remnants of it shot back into his memory in flashes. First, it was the accented voice, which scared him as much as anything else. Then images of the dream with the ghostly lion springing out of his closet and attacking him...slashing at his neck...

Silas shut his eyes, feeling terror rip through him, but then coaxed himself back from the edge. *It wasn’t real...it was just a bad dream...next*

time, I'll get my father.

But that brought back another memory. The ghostly lion had threatened his father's life. Silas felt guilt again, that terrible sensation. He was already responsible for his father's fall from the bridge, and his broken leg and fractured ribs. He couldn't stand to be responsible for any more injuries to him.

Again, he reminded himself that none of that dream stuff was real. Plus, everything was getting better around the camp now. With the help of the townsfolk, they'd made tremendous progress on the repairs. And ever since Archie had given him the staff, it felt like the camp spirit was back.

He felt cheered up by that thought—and the likelihood that the camp would reopen on schedule as planned. Still sleepy, he reached for the sheets and untangled them, planning to snooze a bit more while the baby wasn't crying.

But then his heart caught in his throat—

The sheets were slashed to ribbons.

He felt the fabric that had been torn through like a knife through soft butter. The slashes matched claws. And not just any claws. The ones from the ghostly lion in his nightmare. He poked his hand through the holes, remembering the razor-sharp claws stabbing at his neck. His breath caught, fear seizing hold of him. It squeezed at his heart and lungs, almost strangling him.

He gasped for air as terrible thoughts crashed through his brain. If it was just a bad dream, then how could he explain the rips in his sheet? Did he somehow shred it while he was sleeping? Maybe he'd had a night terror? He'd read about those before, where you did crazy stuff in your sleep that you couldn't remember the next day...like sleepwalking...or even eating.

That had to be the explanation. Nothing else made any sense.

But as he tried to rationalize it away, aided by the daylight burning through his window and chasing away the chill in the air, he felt deeply unsettled. What if the rumors were true? Initially, he believed the camp spirit was something brought to life by the staff. But now that he thought about it, the only thing the staff had brought about was releasing the ghostly lion.

What if...the lion was the camp spirit...not the staff?

That would also explain why, even though Archie still carried the staff after his aunt died, the spirit had faded away, along with the campers. The

staff wasn't enough. Had Aunt Scarlett truly realized the danger of the camp spirit and used the staff to lock it away in the chest?

His eyes snapped to the closet, where the chest remained ensconced in the shadows. There were so many mysteries and strange occurrences, but none of them added up logically.

He thought about the accident on the bridge: his almost falling, then his dad's getting hurt. Not to mention the strange dreams and hauntings. And those creepy, giggling hyenas the night before that had stalked him from the shadows all the way home.

He shuddered, sinking down into his bed under the ripped sheets. They provided flimsy protection. He reached for the staff, feeling the cool, polished wood. Confusion roiled through him like an echo from the bad dream. There was only one thing he knew for sure.

"It's almost like someone—or *something*—doesn't want my family here," he whispered to himself, feeling a deep chill despite the bright sunlight that promised another sweltering day.

* * *

"Hyenas? Here at Camp Pride Rock?"

Archie stabbed at a sausage and took a bite, then flashed Silas a confused look. Around them, the rest of their little crew had gathered in the mess hall for breakfast—the twins, his parents and brother, and Sara, bustling around in the kitchen finishing up.

"I could've sworn I heard them last night," Silas said. "On my way back to the cabin."

"Hyenas...in Arizona?" Archie repeated, as though expecting a joke.

Silas felt his cheeks turn hot. He looked down at his plate.

"Uh, yeah..." he choked out, feeling like mentioning it had been a bad idea.

"You sure it wasn't them co-yotes again?" Archie said, dipping his sausage in syrup and forking it into his mouth. "Howling at the moon? They love to do that round this time."

"I know what they sound like. But this was different. They were... *giggling*."

"Huh, that sounds like hyenas all right. But none of them live around these parts. Not unless they're in a zoo," Archie said with a snort, but then

he softened. "Sorry to disappoint you..." He glanced at the nature books that Silas had toted to breakfast, open to the section on hyenas.

"Right, I knew that," Silas said. "But you said my aunt rescued some? Well, it's a long shot...but maybe some of them escaped and still live out here in the Pride Lands?"

Archie thought that over. "We had some in the enclosures, but they were sent away long ago. They were too much trouble. Doubt they'd even still be alive."

"Trouble?" Silas asked.

"Mischievous little devils," Silas said. "They'd creep into other enclosures...and, well...prey on some of the other animals. We decided that we couldn't keep them around."

"You mean, they killed the other animals?"

Archie nodded. "Chickens were their favorite. We used to raise our own so we could use the eggs. But the hyenas were a handful. The biggest problem—they're too smart for their own good. When they look at you... it's like there's an intelligence there...reminds me of the lions."

He gestured to the old camp pictures framed along the walls. Some displayed groups of campers crowded around his aunt. In the pictures were zebras, elephants, an ostrich, a small pride of lions, and even some gophers, standing alert with their heads popped up to survey the landscape...and then he spotted them. In one picture of a younger-looking Archie, the scavengers lurked in a pen with their bristled, spiky fur and sharp teeth and sharper eyes.

"How long have you worked here?" Silas asked, studying the picture.

Archie furrowed his brow. "Well, I've been here since the start. I was your aunt's first hire, back when she first came up with the idea of a camp that was also an animal sanctuary."

"Oh, wow...I didn't know that."

He hadn't realized the groundskeeper was that old. But it made sense. His aunt had also been older than his father, who was the baby of their family by many years.

"Yup, I'm 'bout as old as the camp," Archie said with a self-deprecating laugh. "And probably just as run-down. But like the camp, I'm still hanging in there, I suppose."

Silas giggled at that thought.

“Ha, you’re too kind to this old bag of bones,” Archie went on. “Sometimes Scarlett used to say that I’d been here so long I should inherit the camp one day.”

“Really? What changed her mind?”

Archie smiled. “Actually, you did.”

“What do you mean?” Silas asked in surprise.

“Scarlett never had kids, as you know. Though she often thought of the campers and rescue animals as her legacy, so to speak. She cared about them all, big and small, as if they were her own.”

Silas felt sad. “I wish I could’ve known her better...she sounds so amazing.”

Archie nodded. “That she was...and more. Anyway, she planned to leave the camp to me. But then you came along, little prince. Your dad called her up one day, saying that you wanted to be a camper. Turns out, you loved all the same books as your aunt.”

“Like...*Tarzan*?” Silas asked.

Archie nodded. “Guess so...I’m not much of a reader myself. Anyway, somewhere along the way, Scarlett changed her mind and decided the camp should stay in the family so it would one day...”

“Belong to me?” Silas said in awe.

Archie nodded and patted Silas’s head fondly. “But I assure you, there are no hyenas lurking around our campgrounds, let alone anywhere in Arizona.”

Silas closed the book with the section on the hyenas, feeling silly. But something had been following him the night before. He was sure of it. He remembered that strange laughter.

Archie spotted the look on his face. “I’ll reckon you’ve got just as active an imagination as your aunt. That’s not a bad thing. Out of imagination come great creations. I can see why your aunt fancied you so much—and wanted you to eventually inherit the camp.”

That cheered Silas up. He appreciated the grounds-keeper’s kind words. Maybe his overactive imagination explained the other strange things that he’d been seeing, too. He felt better that his aunt shared the same gift—even if it felt more like a curse, he thought grimly.

“Look, don’t worry about the co-yotes...or whatever they were,” Archie went on in a kindly voice. He tapped the walking stick. “Remember...the staff protects you.”

With that, Archie polished off the last sausage, grabbed his cowboy hat, and headed off to work. His parents headed back to the cabin with George, who was growing fussier by the minute, while Sara called the twins back to do their extra tutoring. Apparently, Timothy struggled with math during the year...and, well, Natasha enjoyed math.

“Ugh, math,” Timothy grouched, looking mopey as he cleared his plate.

“Yup, fractions today!” Natasha said, sounding freakishly cheerful. “My favorite.”

“*Fractions today...arhhh*,” Zazu cawed from his perch in the rafters of the mess hall.

“Really? You’re nuts. Who likes fractions?” Timothy shot back. “How are we even related?”

“Huh, and twins no less,” Natasha said.

“The hospital must have made a mistake,” Timothy said. “It can totally happen. I saw it in a movie once. They switched one of us at birth. No chance we share DNA.”

“You wish,” Natasha said. “You’re stuck with me and my love of fractions...*forever*.”

She wiggled her fingers and made spooky, haunting noises.

“Ugh, math geek, get away!” Timothy cried, dodging her ticklish fingers. But she got to his sensitive spots under his arms, making him squirm and writhe with laughter.

Their little repartee made Silas giggle. It was true, you could be siblings—even twins—but also so different. He thought of his little brother. What would George be like when he got older? Would they have anything in common? Silas hoped that they would, and that this annoying “wahh-imbalance” phase, as his father had called it this morning, wouldn’t last forever. But he feared that they’d grow up to be total opposites with absolutely nothing in common.

As the twins got up to do their math, he realized that even if you were different, you could still have a deep bond, even stronger than a friendship. Like a *sibling-ship*, perhaps. He liked that idea. But then he cringed. Did this mean George was actually growing on him?

“*Like a fungus*,” he muttered under his breath.

“See you after school,” Timothy said, having recovered from the vicious tickle attack.

“Yup, after I torture him with fractions,” Natasha said with a wink.
“Come on, Zazu.”

“Arhhh...torture...fractions.”

On command, the parrot flapped down from the rafters and alighted on her shoulder. The bird was trained and super smart. Silas was impressed.

The twins tramped through the back door, still arguing about fractions, leaving Silas alone. Tricky math would likely soon be his fate, too. Luckily, his parents had granted him the summer off from any kind of studying, “to adjust to his new life.”

Instead, he pulled out his favorite book...*Tarzan of the Apes*. The title was printed across the cover, over the thrilling illustration of Tarzan trying to rescue Jane from a ferocious creature. His heart beat faster in anticipation of the adventure story. He flipped open his dog-eared copy, which he had lovingly read and reread, and then reread again.

Somehow, the magic of this book never got old, even though he’d memorized most of it.

But then—

He heard something strange.

It was soft, barely audible, but it sounded like...a drumbeat.

Thump, thump.

It came again, louder this time, reverberating through the empty mess hall. And it definitely sounded like drums. He looked up from his book, where he’d already sped through the first chapter, barreling on to the next, totally hooked. How did the book do that?

But the mess hall was eerily quiet except for the steady whir of the ceiling fans cooling it down. He strained his ears but heard nothing strange.

With a sigh—overactive imagination—he went back to his reading.

But then it came again.

Thump. Thump.

This time it was even louder than before. He jerked his head up, and it abruptly stopped. But then he zeroed in on something on the wall—an old black-and-white photograph of a group of campers holding rustic drums. They were pounding on them with sticks.

Feeling unsettled, he set the book down, careful to fold down his page, though he knew that was slowly destroying his beloved book. He approached the picture, his feet padding over the wooden floorboards, kicking up dust as he went.

No matter how much Sara swept, the sand and dust found their way inside, pooling in the cracks and nooks in the floor and settling into the corners.

He reached the picture and studied the campers' young faces. They looked so joyful to be playing their silent rhythm on those drums. His aunt stood over them, clutching her staff, with Zazu perched on it. She wore a proud expression.

He started down the line of pictures. This was the first time he'd inspected them up close. But then he heard it again—*thump, thump*.

He snapped his gaze back to the drum circle picture. The campers' hands in the picture moved up and down as they pounded on the drums.

"What the—" Silas started.

The campers froze. It looked like an ordinary photograph once more. He hurried back to the picture, but nothing was out of place. Was this his imagination again? Or something else?

He couldn't be sure what he saw. A trick of light and shadow? The exciting book revving up his imagination, which tended to run wild?

He shook his head, trying to shake off the unsettling feeling that gripped him like the morning after a bad dream, when all you remembered were fragments and feelings and the fright.

But now, the pictures had his attention. He went down the row, taking in this rich history of the camp, laid out in stark black-and-white photography, the kind of pictures that you had to have developed and printed. His father had explained it to him once while showing him the family picture album with the camp photos.

Each picture showcased a delightful memory—kids chowing down in the mess hall, which was bursting at capacity; the animal sanctuary in full swing, with the enclosures filled with rescue animals; marshmallows roasting over the campfire; a group of hikers tramping over the rope bridge, which looked sturdy and didn't have missing boards. He could feel the camp spirit clearly as he took in these pictures, clutching at the staff, which he now found himself carrying everywhere he went—just like his aunt had done.

He stopped on the last picture of her. She stood alone in this one, posed under the CAMP PRIDE ROCK sign. She held the staff with Zazu on it. Her expression looked hopeful and proud as she wielded a pair of scissors to cut

through a ribbon tied across the entrance to the camp. The brass placard posted under the photograph read OPENING DAY. CAMP PRIDE ROCK.

As he took in her youthful face, Silas thought about what Archie said earlier. How his aunt wanted him to inherit the camp one day. He didn't feel worthy. But as he gazed upon this picture, he felt a connection to her stronger than he'd ever felt, a kinship of sorts, though he never knew her well. They loved the exact same books, and both had active imaginations.

Suddenly, the staff zapped him.

He felt the jolt travel up the wood, like an electric current, and then through his body. He looked at it with a start, and then something else happened. The picture of his aunt came alive.

At first, it was like watching a movie. His aunt cut the ribbon, and then cheered for the grand opening of the camp...but then...

Her face contorted in pain, then started to shrivel up with her eyes popping out of her head as she began to look like a corpse.

"No...this can't be real..." Silas gasped, backing away in horror.

But he couldn't avert his gaze. She continued shriveling up as pieces of flesh went missing from her face, like she was being mauled by a wild animal. It was appalling. Silas stared, frozen with fear, worse than when he watched spooky movies with Jose.

His aunt lunged at Silas through the picture frame. Her skeletal hands grabbed at his shirt. Then her mouth moved, though it was only jawbones and protruding teeth.

Her voice sounded raspy. But it rang through the mess hall, loud and clear.

"Who did this to me? Help meeeeeeeeeee!"



“No, Aunt Scarlett!” Silas screamed.

He staggered back from the picture in shock. But her skeletal fingers dug into his shirt, holding him tight. Her empty eye sockets stared at him as her jaw clenched, trying to form words. “Whooooooooo...did...this...to meeeeeeeee?” she rasped.

Her breath smelled dusty and dank, but not alive.

“I...I don’t know,” Silas gasped at the ghost. “Please...let me go.”

On instinct, he held up the staff, remembering Archie’s words. *The staff will protect you.* Suddenly, it pulsed with red light and exploded, driving back the ghost of his aunt.

“Nooooo...” she shrieked, trying to shield her empty eye sockets from the glow.

“Stay back,” Silas said, directing the light toward her this time.

Still half out of the picture frame, she shrieked again like a banshee as her skeletal form thrashed and writhed in pain. But he held the staff up and drove her back. Just like that, she went up in a puff of reddish smoke.

Silas blinked, but when he looked back—the ghost was gone. All that remained was the photograph with her frozen in time. She looked normal, cheerful, and proud to cut the ribbon to open the camp. He leaned in closer, studying the image...looking for anything amiss.

That was when he saw something. Her dark shadow lurked behind her on the sand, cast by the blazing sun hitting her frame. It should've been human-shaped, of course...but it was blurry and misshapen. The more Silas peered at it, the more it started to resemble something else.

Her shadow looked like that of a...lion.

"No, that's impossible," he gasped. No human should be able to cast that sort of shadow.

But then—

Footsteps echoed through the mess hall.

Silas jerked around with the staff raised protectively.

"Stay back, I'm warning you!"

But it was only Timothy, standing in the kitchen holding a juice box. He frowned in concern. "Uh, you okay in there?"

Natasha poked her head through the door. "Yeah, you've been acting strange lately. Maybe you should go see Rafi. He always helps me when I'm sick."

"Oh, right...I was just messing around with my staff," Silas said, trying to cover for his actions. He looked down, feeling foolish for getting caught talking to a photograph.

He glanced back at the pictures hung in a neat row along the wall. But they only looked like regular photographs now, their subjects frozen for an ephemeral moment, mere snapshots of time. *Blink*, he thought, *and the moment passes forever*.

"Oh, cool," Timothy said, perking up. "Maybe we can play Avengers later? I'll be Cap, and you can be...Hulk...or maybe Thor, the God of Thunder?"

Silas grinned. "No way. I call...Iron Man."

But Natasha butted in. "Not until after you finish your fractions, remember?"

Timothy grimaced and whispered to Silas. "She's definitely Thanos. Am I right?"

"Jeez, if I'm gonna be a villain," Natasha said, "then I'm playing Loki—God of Mischief."

With that, the twins returned to finish their schoolwork, despite Timothy's protests. They could be heard arguing all the way back to their apartment. The door swung shut, finally quieting their bickering. Silence fell over the mess hall.

Silas had felt cheerful when they were around, but now uneasiness crept back in. He could still feel his aunt's ghost tearing at his shirt and smell her dank breath wafting out of her skull's jawbones.

He glanced down at his shirt. Was that a smudge on it where she'd grabbed him? He examined it closer, but it could be from anything, including his breakfast. He shrugged it off.

"I'm tired, that's all," he told himself.

He hadn't slept well for days, not since the accident, due to all the horrible nightmares piercing his sleep. He thought about how his mom had become a zombie since having George. Silas wondered if he'd come into the world red-faced and squalling.

Probably, he thought with a wince.

Being tired could make you hallucinate and see things that weren't there. He'd read about that once in a book, or maybe seen it in one of Jose's movies. That was all.

Lack of sleep *plus* overactive imagination *equaled* what happened in the mess hall.

It wasn't fractions, but the math added up perfectly. He didn't need Rafi to tell him what Rafi had told his father the other day when he came home from the hospital. *Rest is the best medicine*. Oh, and there was one other thing. *Hakuna matata...no worries*.

He needed to follow the camp slogan and stop worrying about...well...pretty much everything.

With that vow, he grabbed his staff and books and headed back home. On the way out, he had to pass that grand opening photograph of his aunt. He tried to ignore it, but his eyes seemed to have a mind of their own. They tracked over her smiling face.

The picture looked perfectly normal, frozen in time like it should be....

But then...her eyes seemed to move, following him as he walked past, like something out of a creepy haunted house. Her ghostly voice echoed through his head, the memory still fresh. *Who did this to me?* He shivered at it. He had no idea what that could mean.

With a fresh surge of fear rushing through his bloodstream like a fast-acting drug, he jumped back and ran for the exit. He didn't stop running until the door swung shut behind him and he was standing in broad daylight. He looked back at the mess hall. The building was tall and strong, despite the peeling paint and siding that needed many repairs. But he couldn't shake the feeling that it was haunted...that maybe even the whole camp was haunted.

After all, his aunt died in a mysterious accident somewhere in the Pride Lands, though he still had no idea what actually happened to her. He thought of Billie from the gas station: *Bad things happen to folks who live up there.* She must have been talking about his aunt.

But had other things happened? And if so, what kind of things?

He thought hard. What did he know about ghosts? Mostly it was stuff from Jose's stash of spooky movies. Some of them were even R-rated, meaning "parental guidance required," though they ignored the warning, even if it gave them both nightmares and kept them up at their sleepovers.

Ghosts were souls that didn't pass on to the other side and got trapped on Earth, usually after they died prematurely or were murdered. That idea made him turn into a scaredy-cat who could jump at his own shadow. But he made himself think it all the way through.

Was it possible that something *bad* had happened to his aunt?

Who did this to me?

Her ghostly voice echoed in his head. Was that what she meant when she grabbed his shirt and shrieked at him, before he used the staff to chase her ghost away?

He kept walking down the trail, starting to sweat in the harsh sunlight, and even that began to feel like an assault. Everything out here seemed dangerous, even deadly, from the terrain to the cactus and trees to the bugs and predators that roamed the Pride Lands.

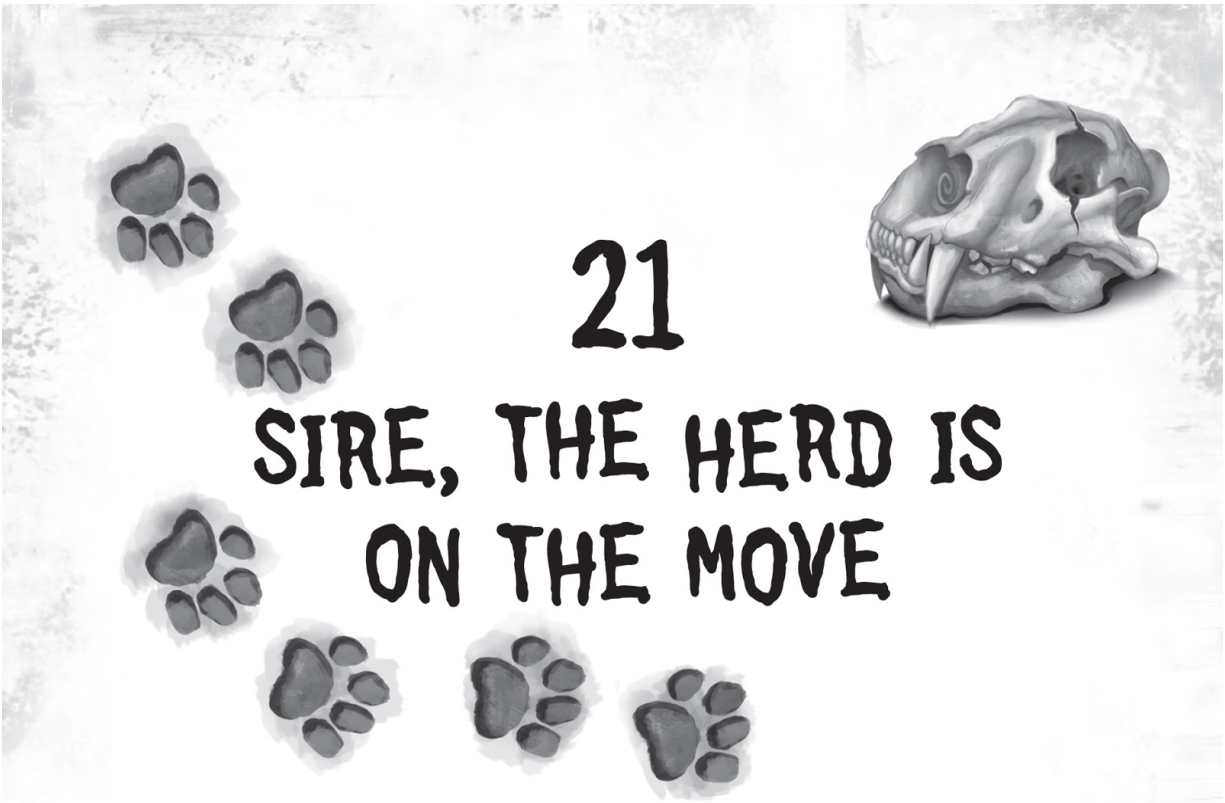
But...ghosts?

That was a whole other level.

He shook his head, making sweat fly from his brow. He trekked back toward the cabin with his books and the staff. The more he tried to make sense of everything, the more confused he felt. Kind of like Timothy with his fractions. All he knew was none of it made any sense.

I'm imagining it, he thought.

But the more he kept telling himself that, the less certain he felt.



The rest of the day passed in a normal way, with an afternoon nap during the hottest part of the day, then dinner in the mess hall with his family, though Silas made sure to sit with his back facing the photographs this time. Even so, he remained terribly unsettled.

He had turned into a scaredy-cat again, jumping at every little thing. Sara thumping the platters on the mess hall tables. *Jump!* Archie tapping his shoulder to inform him the fence was repaired. *Jump!* George turning into a *wahh-mbulance* and screaming his head off. *Jump!*

“Hey, are you okay?”

Jump!

Silas jerked around to see Natasha this time. She exchanged worried looks with Timothy. They’d finished eating, and it was time to help clear the table and wash the dishes, their usual chores.

“Yeah, you didn’t eat anything,” Timothy said, pointing to Silas’s plate loaded with food.

“Usually you devour everything in sight,” Natasha added with a smirk. “What’s wrong?”

They were right. Silas loved their mother’s cooking. He practically inhaled it and then went for seconds, and even thirds on occasion. He had developed favorites. Green chile macaroni and cheese. Bison meatloaf. Chicken tamales in spicy red sauce. Her cooking was much spicier than the Cuban food he grew up eating, and that was saying a lot.

But he’d come to love the burn on his tongue. Something about it added more flavor, and you kept going back for more, even when it scorched your tongue hotter than the blazing desert sun at midday. But not right then. His stomach sloshed and churned with anxiety.

He kept remembering his aunt’s ghost screaming at him—*Who did this to me?* He couldn’t shake his fear. But he couldn’t tell anyone about it. No way they’d believe him.

He forced a brave smile. “Guess I’m just tired,” he said, handing the plate over sheepishly. “Tell your mom I’m sorry—”

But Natasha waved him off.

“You’re taking this in a doggie bag. I bet you’ll get hungry later.”

“Yeah, trust us, midnight snacks are the best,” Timothy said with a conspiratorial wink.

* * *

Silas slid into bed with the staff, utterly worn out. Before he went to sleep, he had his dad double-check that the front door was locked *and* bolted. He also had Dad check the window in his room and the closet door, too.

“Kiddo, what’s gotten into you?” Dad said after reassuring him that both were shut tight, like he used to when Silas was a little kid. He hadn’t asked his dad to tuck him in...well...in years.

“I dunno,” Silas said, feeling ashamed.

Dad hobbled over to the bed on crutches. He pulled up the sheet, noticing how it was torn. “What the heck are you doing in your sleep?” he asked, examining the slashes.

“Bad dreams. Remember?”

Dad nodded, looking relieved. He tucked the shredded sheets around Silas up to his neck, even though it was warm that night. The fan spun

slowly overhead, tossing around hot air but doing little to cool it down. Silas missed the powerful AC they had back in Florida.

"It's probably the move," Dad said. "You're just adjusting. Everything is new here."

"Yeah, I'll bet you're right," Silas said, even though he wasn't sure.

His fears tended to amplify everything out of proportion, it was true—they always had. But these *hauntings* felt different. He couldn't explain it, though.

Dad nodded, pressing the sheet down tighter around him. "I promise, it'll get better once you're settled. Lots of good things are happening around the camp now. You'll see."

"Bad things, too," Silas said, unable to help himself. He glanced down at his father's cast.

"Oh, this old thing?" Dad joked, knocking on it and sharing a goofy grin. "Doc patched me up good as new. Better than new! Didn't you call me...Iron Man?" he said with a wink.

"That was Timothy."

"Well, watch out...as soon as I get it off, I'll be out there fighting crime and defending the universe." Dad did a silly karate chop, which was nothing like Tony Stark's moves.

Silas grinned in spite of himself. His father could be cheesy with his dad jokes, but he always made everything more fun and, consequently, less scary.

"Son, you have to look on the bright side," he went on, giving Silas a squeeze on his shoulder. "That's the only way to get through life. It's what I always try to do."

"The bright side?" Silas asked. He didn't always understand all his father's old-fashioned sayings. Some were downright strange and confusing, while others were pretty silly.

Dad nodded. "Like when the sun is out? And shining bright? You ever see a scary movie like that?"

"Uh...no," Silas admitted. They all took place late at night, or in dark creepy houses. Oh, and basements. They didn't have those in Florida...or in Arizona. But you didn't want to go into them, Silas had learned. That was basically Spooky Movie 101.

"Same for real life. Just imagine that the sun is shining and nothing can go wrong. Think about the good things since we moved out here. You've

already made new friends.”

“Timothy and Natasha?”

“Exactly! And once we get everything up and running with all the campers, it’s going to be so much fun. I promise, you’ll see. It’ll all be worth it. Your old friends will visit, too.”

He missed Jose and Tamara. They texted almost every day, but it wasn’t the same. Sometimes their texts made him sad. Like hearing about all the stuff he was missing out on back home. The beach picnics, and adventures at the skate park, and sleepovers at Jose’s house.

“Well, sweet dreams,” Dad said. “Don’t let the scorpions bite.”

“Don’t you mean...sting?”

“Ha, good one! I’m adding that to my joke repertoire. Your mom will kill me.” With that, he hopped to his feet, wobbling slightly, then used his crutches to make it to the door. He looked back one last time before shutting it behind him. Silas could hear him thumping back to the sofa.

Feeling less afraid than he had...well...since they’d arrived at Camp Pride Rock, Silas sank into a deep slumber filled with brighter dreams, the kind where the sun shone and you had superpowers that you didn’t have in real life.

In the middle of the night, Silas woke abruptly from a fantastic dream where he’d been flying. He blinked in the semi-darkness of his room as the dream faded away and reality came into stark focus. Thankfully, nothing seemed out of place. No weird sounds or lights.

What had woken him up?

He listened for George’s wailing, but the baby was quiet. The fan cycled overhead, doing little to cool the warm night. His sheets were soaked with sweat. Maybe that was what woke him.

But then—

He heard something that sounded like *thunder*.

Back in Florida, they had horrible thunderstorms that spat rain, wind, and lightning and could take down palm trees and rip the roofs off houses. But this sounded different.

It was a low rumble that didn’t break. It grew steadily louder instead of dying out. No lightning pulsed in the dark skies, either.

What could it be?

The low rumble gradually built into a thunderous sound that shook the ground. The whole cabin started to quake and tremble from the force of it.

He grabbed his staff, crept out of bed, and tiptoed down the hall to get his father. The hallway was dark and shadowy.

Fear wrapped around him like a stranglehold. He could even feel the floor vibrating under his feet. It kept getting worse. Dad was sound asleep on the sofa, snoring loudly. His cast was elevated on a stack of pillows, as usual. How could he sleep through this?

Silas expected George to wake up any second. He always roused during their Florida thunderstorms. But everyone else remained fast asleep. How was that possible?

Why was he the only one who could hear this terrible racket? It sounded like thunder that wouldn't subside, but grew louder and louder, like something terrible was coming for them. Now he regretted telling Timothy that he didn't want to be Thor, the God of Thunder.

Superstitiously, he wondered if he'd brought this on himself.

The gods could be vengeful.

Clasping the staff tighter, he continued through the living room toward the porch. The thunderous noise was even louder now that he was close to the doors. He thrust them open to the night, scanning the sky for thunderheads. But the sky was clear and star-filled, with a thin crescent moon hovering over the Pride Lands, casting a silvery glow over the desert landscape.

He saw something moving out there.

Actually, a whole lot of somethings.

They moved as one huge mass, trampling over the campgrounds and kicking up dust and sand into a thick cloud that hovered about them. The closer they got, the more he could make out their giant bodies and horns. It looked like a herd of oddly shaped cattle.

"No...this can't be happening."

Suddenly, he recognized them from his wildlife books. They looked like wildebeests, which always reminded him of buffalo or cows. And right then, he realized what this was—

It was a stampede.

A stampede was when a herd of animals got spooked and panicked together. They were super dangerous. A stampede could trample...well...anything unlucky enough to get in its path, without any logical reason.

The thunderous noise that kept growing louder came from their hooves trampling the ground. It wasn't just a few of them, but more like hundreds,

maybe even thousands.

But there was more.

He heard it—a deep growl that sounded like a lion. He saw a flash of green eyes and tawny fur driving the frenzied mass of animals across the Pride Lands toward the cabin.

These weren't ordinary animals, he realized with a start as they moved as one mass driven by the lion. Their eyes glowed with unnatural green light, as if they were possessed, or maybe even ghosts. He couldn't be sure. All he knew was that this was abnormal.

And worse—

They were coming right this way. They tore through the campgrounds, destroying everything in their path, and veered toward him. The newly repaired fencing, the cabins, and the freshly graveled paths were all trampled under their power and hooves as they headed straight for his home.

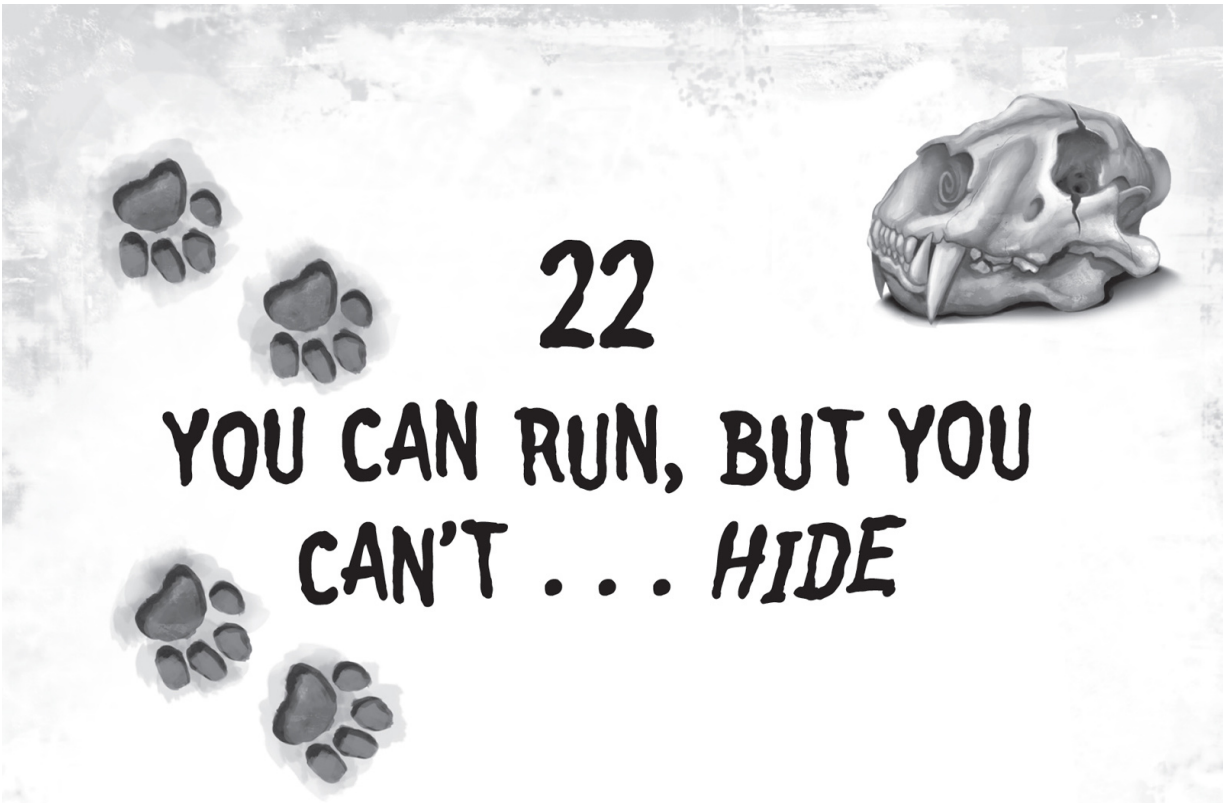
Silas watched in horror as the mass of wildebeests pounded toward him. They didn't slow—instead, they sped up, kicking up sand and dust under their deadly hooves. They ran wildly, with their eerie emerald eyes glowing in the night.

Silas felt paralyzed, but he knew he had to do something—anything.

They were all in danger.

Adrenaline pumped through his body, unfreezing his paralysis and jerking him to action. He ran back inside the cabin as the thundering hooves reached deafening levels.

“Mom...Dad...wake up!”



“Wake up...they’re coming! It’s the lion...he’s causing a stampede!”

Silas ran to get his parents before the beasts could tear through their cabin and trample them. The noise outside from thousands of hooves pounding the ground had become deafening.

“What...what’s wrong?” a groggy voice called from the sofa.

Dad struggled to wake up.

How can he sleep through this? Silas wondered as he dashed over to the sofa. He could feel the floorboards vibrating under his bare feet. Even the walls were rattling now. In fact, everything was shaking, almost like there was an earthquake.

“Wake up!” Silas yelled. “The stampede...we have to run for it!”

“The what?” Dad said, hobbling up and hopping on his good leg.

“Outside, follow me....”

Silas led his dad onto the porch to show him. Dad hopped after him on one leg, half-asleep.

“Look, out here...” Silas started, but then he trailed off.

His mouth dropped open in shock. He scanned the terrain. It was *silent*.

“No, this can’t be...” he said incredulously.

The Pride Lands were deserted. No stampede. No wildebeests. No hooves pounding at the ground. No dust cloud. Nothing was damaged—it all looked completely normal.

Silence clung to the chilly night air. In fact, the only strange thing was how silent it was. Usually, if it wasn’t the coyotes howling, the screech owls took up their nightly cries to startle their prey from the underbrush and out into the open.

“They were just here...” Silas said. “I swear it...hundreds of them...”

“Who was here?” Dad said in confusion.

“The wildebeests...” Silas trailed off, realizing how ridiculous that sounded.

Dad looked around, still disoriented from being woken up in the middle of the night. His brows knitted together in annoyance. “Silas, is this some kind of prank?”

“No...they were here...I swear...”

That was when a terrible noise pierced the still night air. “*Wahhhhhhh!*”

George woke up in a furious fit of crying. Silas cringed back.

“Just great, and now you woke the baby,” Dad muttered. “Do you know how hard it is to get him to sleep? Your poor mother needs her rest!”

Silas shrank back. He wished he could get smaller like Ant-Man—or better yet, turn invisible. The guilt ate at him like a rodent chewing through the insulation in the walls. That happened once at their house in Florida. Well, that was what his stomach felt like.

Dad shook his head in disappointment. “Son, what’s gotten into you lately? You haven’t been acting like yourself ever since we moved here. What’s going on?”

Silas looked down at his feet.

“Yeah, it just was a bad joke,” he lied. “I’m really sorry.”

He couldn’t admit the truth. That he would’ve sworn on his life that there was a stampede. He could still remember the terrible noise, like rumbling thunder that didn’t fade out but only grew louder. The way their hooves kicked up dust that floated above them like dark clouds. And the smell—dust, and sand, and sweat, and panic—an unforgettable aroma. And worse, how their eyes glowed unnaturally with emerald light. They galloped

as if someone—or something—was behind them, whipping them into a terrible frenzy.

But...had something truly been there?

He shook his head in confusion. Either he'd imagined it—and all the other crazy things that had been happening—or something supernatural was going on. Not that it mattered. His father would never believe him. It was better to pretend that it was a joke gone awry.

"Fine. Go back to bed," Dad said in a calm voice. It would have been better if he yelled. This serious voice was far more terrible. "We'll talk about it in the morning."

Silas did as he was told, feeling worse than ever. He walked back to his room in shame, serenaded by his brother's wailing. He knew what he had seen, but he couldn't explain it, especially why it had vanished and his father hadn't been able to see it, too.

It felt like he was being *haunted*...but that was impossible. His eyes darted to the closet. The door was ajar. He crept over and checked the chest.

It was still there, locked tight. He grabbed the staff and waved it over the trunk, but nothing happened this time. The staff remained dark, and the lid remained shut. He tried again, cringing back, but again...nothing unusual happened.

No ghostly lion. No strange voice.

He ran his fingers over the lock, feeling for a lever, and it opened at his touch. His heart still pounding like those ghostly hooves, he cracked open the chest and froze. But it was all as he'd left it. The dusty lion pelt lay at the bottom. He breathed a sigh of relief and shut the lid.

His head swam with confusion. The strange vision of the stampede felt fresh, like a nightmare that didn't fade with waking but rather grew stronger. He could smell it and hear it and feel it. But he couldn't explain it.

As he thought back through everything, he could trace the origin back to when Archie bestowed the staff upon him and he opened the trunk for the first time. He could still remember the ghostly lion and his menacing voice. Could he be behind all the hauntings?

But even as he thought about that, he felt ridiculous. Nobody would ever believe him. Worse, he dreaded the lecture that he was going to get from his father the next day. He wondered if there would be a punishment, like getting grounded or losing his phone. The idea of not being able to

message Jose and Tamara upset him. But then he realized something. The last time they'd written to each other was two days ago.

Their last bubbles glowed in pink and blue but remained unanswered. Silas felt guilty. They were already losing touch, and it hadn't even been that long.

"*Hakuna matata...*" he muttered softly.

He typed that into the text bubble and hit send.

But even those words didn't cheer him up. He returned to bed and sank into a dark, dreamless sleep for once. But it was almost worse, because it felt like the sleep of the dead.

* * *

Luckily, his father saw the mournful expression on his face when Silas awoke and padded out of his room, so he went easy on him. Better yet, no grounding for life or—worse—from electronics.

"But no more practical jokes," Dad said in his stern dad voice. "That little prank with the staff and Archie was funny, but like anything, it could be annoying or even dangerous if taken too far. What happened last night can never happen again. Got it?"

"Sorry...I promise it won't happen again," Silas said, trying to look as contrite as possible to lessen any looming punishment.

He was lucky Mom wasn't involved this time. Then he would have been grounded for sure and probably lost his phone. His dad let him off the hook with only a warning.

"Next time, your phone," he said, nodding to it.

It chimed as if on cue, lighting up with texts from his friends replying to his "*Hakuna matata*" message. By now they knew what that camp slogan meant.

"Oh, it's Jose and Tamara," Silas said, showing his father the screen.

Dad's face softened, knowing how much his old friends meant to him. "Glad you're keeping in touch with them. Even more reason to be on your —"

"*Best behavior*," Silas finished for him.

He'd heard that a million times. It always made him worry that his best behavior would never be good enough for his parents, or anyone else. And how did you quantify *best*, even?

Probably with fractions, or worse...*algebra*. He wasn't sure what that was exactly, only that it was something terrible that happened to you around eighth grade. He was already dreading it.

Dad said that he was skipping breakfast that morning to catch up on sleep. Mom had been up late with the baby, so they were finally both resting. Silas felt guilt stab at him again. He wandered down to the mess hall by himself, his boots padding over the fresh gravel. It was late, past breakfast, but he hoped to scrounge up some leftovers to tide him over to lunch.

He swept his gaze over the Pride Lands, taking in the beauty of this austere landscape, so different from Orlando. The vision of the stampede—the thousands of eerie green eyes charging over the mesas, driven into a violent frenzy by the ghostly lion chasing them—hit him full force. He let out a shocked gasp, but then the vision vanished again, just as quickly as it had appeared. He blinked in the bright sunlight, remembering how his dad said it chased bad dreams away.

“Not this one,” Silas muttered under his breath.

His heart pounded faster, making him sweat and breathe harder at the same time, ready to fight. But how could you battle back against something that you weren't sure was even there? He remembered how afraid everything made him. It was more like...*run for your life*.

He didn't risk another look back, but hurried to the mess hall. He pushed open the door, smelling the lingering aroma of pancakes and bacon. Now he regretted oversleeping and missing out on hot breakfast. But then he heard a voice echoing out from the kitchen.

“Oh, no...how did he get out?”

It was Timothy...and he sounded really upset. He was back in his family's little apartment. Silas heard some more anguished cries, accompanied by banging around. Then Timothy burst into the mess hall. Natasha was hot on his heels.

“What's wrong?” Silas asked.

“Zazu is missing!” Timothy cried. *“Someone must have broken in and let him out of his cage. We discovered him missing this morning.”*

“Or you forgot to latch it,” Natasha said accusingly. *“You're always forgetting things.”*

“Yeah, things that don't matter! Like verb conjugation and fractions... not this.”

“You’re sure you latched it?” Natasha said.

“I always double-check,” Timothy said. “Just in case.”

“Last night...” Silas said, remembering the ghost wildebeest stampede. Lots of bad things had happened the previous night. He wondered if Zazu had also heard the stampede.

They both spotted the look on his face.

“What about last night?” Natasha said, narrowing her eyes. “What aren’t you telling us?”

“Yeah, Silas, what is it?” Timothy said, fixing him with a direct gaze. “Look, if you know anything that can help us find Zazu, then you have to tell us...even if it’s crazy.”

Silas glanced around the mess hall, which was empty right then. He was worried they wouldn’t believe him. But then he thought of poor Zazu. He lowered his voice.

“Just that...a lot of strange things have been happening around here lately,” he whispered. “I wonder if something more is going on...” he trailed off, uncertainly.

“What do you mean?” Timothy asked.

“Uh, yeah, like what?” Natasha added.

“Well, the accident, for starters. My dad falling off the bridge and getting hurt. Ever since then, I’ve been seeing things...well...that aren’t really there. Now, Zazu is missing.”

“Like ghosts?” Natasha gasped.

“Or specters?” Timothy said.

“They’re the same thing,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes. “But yeah, like that?”

They both peered at him expectantly.

Silas nodded. “I think I saw my aunt’s ghost in here yesterday. She came alive in one of the pictures over there. Well...I think she was asking me for help.”

“Help?” Natasha repeated, thinking that over. “Oh, sometimes when spirits don’t pass on, they need help to figure out what happened to them. Uh, I saw it in a movie once.”

“Yeah, a dumb old movie called *Ghost*,” Timothy said with a wince. “That Mom made us watch. It wasn’t even scary—it was funny. What a total rip-off.”

“In the movie,” Natasha went on, ignoring him, “someone gets killed, and then he comes back as a ghost so that his wife can help find whoever did it.”

“Ugh, you left out all the gross kissing parts,” Timothy said, making a gagging face. He leaned toward Silas. “There was a lot of...” he said, and made kissy noises.

Silas smirked, but then they all turned more serious as it sank in that something weird might be happening at the camp...haunting it, even...like in that movie.

“Maybe,” Silas said. “I still don’t know that much about how my aunt died. But there’s more...and it’s gonna sound really weird. I’m worried that you won’t believe me.”

He trailed off and looked down. They were his only real friends here. He didn’t want to lose them. He liked Archie and Rafi and Sara, but they were grown-ups and didn’t exactly count as friends. But the twins shook their heads adamantly—and in unison, as only twins could.

“If it helps us find Zazu, you have to tell us,” Natasha said.

“Right, your aunt loved him,” Timothy added. “She would want us to find him.”

Silas hesitated, but then he forced the words out. He told them everything about finding the chest in his closet, then using the staff to release the ghostly lion from it.

“A what?” Timothy said. They exchanged a look.

“What else can you tell us about it?” Natasha added, clearly spooked.

“Well, he had these glowing green eyes,” Silas said. “And he talked in a fancy voice with an accent. It sounds weird, but he had manners. He also said that someone locked him away.”

The twins both looked alarmed by that. They glanced over at the wall. Silas followed their gaze down the row of photographs to an empty spot next to the grand opening picture.

Then his eyes widened. How had he never noticed it before? Clearly, another picture used to hang there, but it had been taken down. However, the outline of the missing photograph had been bleached into the wall by the sunlight streaming through the windows.

“What is it?” Silas said, feeling uneasy. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Finally, Natasha spoke, but in a hushed voice.

“Are you talking about...Scar?”



“What do you mean, Scar?” Silas asked, not liking the sound of that. The twins lowered their voices and began to tell Silas a story.

“There’s an old camp legend,” Natasha started after making sure nobody was listening. “About the ghost of a lion named Scar who used to haunt the campground. At first, some campers reported seeing the lion prowling through the Pride Lands at night....”

Timothy nodded and picked up the story. “He had these glowing green eyes, like what you described. At first, seeing him was considered a sign of good luck.”

“Yup, campers started coming just to catch a glimpse of his spirit,” Natasha went on. “There were even some local news stories. Mom has clippings in an old photo album I found.”

“So, he was a good thing?” Silas said. The ghostly lion had felt menacing.

“Only at first,” Timothy said. “The press brought even more campers. But then...”

“What?” Silas said, feeling his heart start to thump faster. “You have to tell me.”

The twins exchanged a knowing look.

“In the beginning, it was great,” Natasha whispered, looking afraid. “But then strange accidents and hauntings started to happen at the camp, until Scarlett locked the supposed ghost away.”

“Boo!” Timothy said, jumping at Silas.

Silas cringed back, then scowled.

“Not funny,” he grouched, feeling like he almost had a heart attack.

“Anyway, that was all before we were born,” Natasha said with a wink. “But ghosts aren’t real. You know that? We were just messing around. It’s an old camp ghost story.”

“We use it to scare new campers,” Timothy said. “Like you. It worked, didn’t it?”

Silas took that all in. But there was no mistaking now that he’d seen a ghostly lion with glowing green eyes. Even crazier, the lion had been locked away in his aunt’s chest. The details seemed to match up perfectly, and he hadn’t heard of the camp legend before, either.

For the first time since the accident, he started to believe that what he’d been experiencing wasn’t simply his eyes playing tricks on him, or his overactive imagination—it actually might be real. But that meant Scar was real. His ghost did haunt the Pride Lands.

And worse, Silas had unwittingly let him loose again. His aunt must’ve had a good reason for locking him away. Natasha mentioned accidents and hauntings affecting the camp.

“But...what if Scar is real?” Silas asked. His voice came out barely a whisper.

The twins frowned. “What do you mean by that?” Natasha asked. “Listen, it’s just a silly ghost story we tell around the campfire at night while we make s’mores. It’s not real.”

“Yeah, it was only a joke,” Timothy said. “Sorry, we didn’t mean to scare you.”

Natasha nodded. “Zazu going missing...he’s done it before. This isn’t the first time. Timothy forgets to lock his cage.”

“Or he unlocks it himself,” Timothy said. “That bird is crazy smart. You’ve heard him talk, right?”

“But he always comes back,” Natasha said.

Silas set his lips. Their explanations rang hollow after everything that he'd been experiencing lately. He wasn't sure how it all fit together—the rope bridge giving way, the chest and ghostly lion, the stampede, now Zazu going missing. But he was determined to find out.

“Fine, but I’ve got something to show you,” Silas said. “I think it belonged to my aunt.”

* * *

Silas took them to the cabin. Before he opened the door, he hushed them. Everyone was probably still sleeping in. “Uh, I kind of woke them up last night,” he said, feeling his cheeks burning.

“You what?” Natasha said. “Why?”

“Yeah, grown-ups *hate* being woken up,” Timothy said. “Mom needs her *beauty sleep*.”

“Whatever the heck that means,” Natasha said. “Adults can be so crazy sometimes.”

“Ha, you can say that again,” Silas said, enjoying their easy banter and joking around. “I got in big trouble, trust me. I’m lucky I still have my freedom...and my phone.”

The twins giggled, relating to that. It felt like...well...he finally had friends again. But then he turned more serious.

“But be quiet,” he whispered. “Trust me on this. We don’t want to wake George up.”

“George?” Timothy said. “Oh, you mean...*Gopher*. That’s what we call him.”

Timothy did an impression of his two front teeth. They all giggled, and then Silas opened the door and led them inside. Luckily, Dad wasn’t on the sofa. He had probably gone to help Archie out.

The master bedroom door was closed, and he could hear the whirring of the white noise machine. That meant Mom and...Gopher...were sleeping.

“Shhhhh,” he said, raising his finger to his lips. Then they crept down the hall to his little room. They hurried inside, and he shut the door tight.

He listened for the *wahh-mbulance* to wake up and start bawling his head off. But it was quiet. He breathed a sigh of relief. Only then did he feel comfortable talking in a normal voice. He gestured toward the closet door.

“It’s over here...” he said.

“A closet?” Timothy said. “Like, we’ve seen that before. What’s so important about a closet?”

“Dummy, he means what’s *inside* the closet,” Natasha said. “Sometimes you’re so *literal*.”

“Hey, don’t call me that,” Timothy said. “I am not *literal*...whatever that means...”

Natasha rolled her eyes at him. “Next birthday, I’m getting you a dictionary—*literally*,” she added with a smirk. “That means I’m actually doing it.”

“Very funny, ha-ha,” Timothy said, then whispered to Silas, “Be glad Gopher is your brother. Sisters can be so extra sometimes. You’re lucky you don’t have one.”

Natasha scowled. “Hey, I heard that. I’m standing right here.”

“See what I mean?” Timothy said.

Silas had to shake his head at their sibling antics. Despite their bickering, it was clear that they loved each other. They did nearly everything together. He wondered if when George got a little older, they would be close like that, too. He harbored doubts, but he realized he hoped they would. That was a big step.

“So, what’s in this closet?” Natasha said, thrusting the door open. It creaked loudly.

“Shhhhh!” Silas hissed.

They all held their breath, but George didn’t stir. They were safe.

“Oh, cool, it’s a pirate chest,” Timothy said. “I wonder if it’s filled with booty. That means *loot*.”

Natasha sighed. “Pirates? Really? In the middle of the Arizona desert. There’s no ocean in sight. Where would they sail their ships?”

“You never know,” Timothy said. “Maybe they’re land pirates...who sail on land...”

He trailed off, realizing he’d lost.

“No, I think it belonged to my aunt,” Silas said. “And she wasn’t a pirate—as far I know, anyway.”

The twins leaned over and inspected it closer.

“Maybe there’s a clue in the chest,” Natasha said, always sharp. She ran her fingers over the drawings carved into the leather. Her fingers traced over the indentations. “Didn’t you say the lion was locked away in here? Until you unlocked the chest...and let him out?”

“You’re right,” Silas said. “It all started with the chest...”

“Well, that does look like Scar,” she said, pointing to the lion with eerie green eyes. The illustrations carved into the chest were so detailed and lifelike that they gave Silas the creeps.

He nodded, swallowing his fear. “That’s our first clue.”

“Do you think the story is real?” Natasha said. “About the camp spirit?”

“What, you mean you think there’s actually a ghost lion haunting the camp?” Timothy said, sounding jumpy. “That it’s not just some made-up story to spook campers?”

“Well, how else do you explain the drawing?” Silas asked. “That looks just like him, right?”

“Not so fast,” Natasha said. “Maybe your aunt commissioned it...”

“Comm-ish-ish-what?” Timothy asked.

“That means she had it made specially for her,” Natasha said. “That could explain the drawings matching the old camp legend. It’s a perfectly logical explanation for the similarity.”

“Don’t you mean *literal* explanation?” Timothy said, making his sister roll her eyes.

“You really need that dictionary ASAP.”

She brushed the dust from the top of the chest, revealing a message hidden there.

BEWARE—KEEP OUT! DO NOT OPEN!

They all jumped back.

Silas felt his heart lurch. The message looked like it had been carved there with a knife. The letters were jagged, clearly by a different hand than the elegant illustrations.

“Uh, you opened a secret locked chest...with that warning?” Natasha said with a gulp.

“Duh...I didn’t see it...” Silas said. “Or, trust me, I’d have left it alone.”

“Major bummer, too late for that,” Timothy said. “Cat’s out of the bag. Or rather *lion*.”

The twins laughed. But it sounded strained. Fear had clearly seized hold of them, too. The legend had power, it seemed, and so did this mysterious chest.

“Ready?” Silas said, and they nodded. “Open sesame,” he said for dramatic effect.

Then he sprang the lid open. It smelled dusty and dank. The fumes leaked out and hit them full force. Ever since he'd first opened it with the staff, it came undone easily. He realized that the staff must have broken whatever protection spells his aunt had put on it.

"Ugh, yuck," Timothy said in disgust. "Reminds me of when that squirrel crawled into our vents and...well...may he rest in peace."

"Yeah, like something died in there," Natasha said.

"You can say that again," Timothy agreed, pinching his nose shut and waving his hand in front of his face to ward away the stale odor. "Look, more drawings," he said once he recovered.

He pointed to one inside the chest. It showed Scar kneeling before a throne, where another regal-looking lion sat, holding a newborn lion cub to his chest.

ALL HAIL THE PRINCE, the inscription underneath read.

Natasha reached inside, finding the musty old lion pelt. Dust billowed off it as she removed it from the chest. She held it up in her hands. But it remained just as lifeless as before...no ghosts sprang out...nothing weird happened. It was a bit disappointing.

"So do you believe me?" Silas said, fearing the worst.

Natasha put the lion pelt away, then bit her lip. "Whatever was locked up in here—whatever spirit you accidentally released the other night—it's long gone."

Silas nodded. "You're right. He escaped through my window. But then he came back...for this..." he said, holding up the staff. "He claims it should belong to him."

"The ghost lion wants a staff?" Timothy said. "Wow, this gets weirder all the time."

Silas felt deflated. "Sorry for wasting your time. It does sound pretty...well...far-fetched. I don't blame you if you don't believe me—"

But Natasha cut him off. "Clearly, your aunt didn't want this chest opened. Look at this warning message! So she must have known something. What else did she know?"

"Yeah," Timothy said with a nod. "We loved her like family, and she was fun and funny and always up for a joke. But she wasn't crazy, if that's what you're thinking."

"There's one thing I know for sure," Natasha went on, thinking it over. "If she locked something away in that chest, and put that warning on it, then

she did it for good reason.”

* * *

They snooped around the cabin for more clues, anything that would help explain the chest and the strange happenings and the ghostly lion.

“Over here,” Silas said, pulling a book off the shelf. It was thick and dusty, and looked old. His heart skipped when he read the title—

THE LEGEND OF SCAR

The cover depicted two lions—one sitting on the throne, while the other lurked in the shadows. The one in the darkness had glowing green eyes, just like the ghost. He showed it to the twins, who also looked a bit spooked. They all settled into the sofa, which had become his father’s resting spot, to read it.

Silas sank down in the groove worn from his father and felt a strange comfort. The sofa was beat-up and old, like everything in the cabin, and had faded from white to an off-beige color. It reminded him of their couch in Orlando. It even had some stains. But it was comfy and welcoming in a way that newer things couldn’t replicate.

Hungrily, Silas tore through the book aloud while the twins read along. This book was exactly the kind he most loved, only this one scared him in a deep way. It told the story of two lions—King Mufasa and his younger brother, Scar, who was next in line for the throne.

However, when Mufasa had a son named Simba, the new prince of the Pride Lands, he replaced Scar as the one to inherit the throne. Scar was quite upset with this terrible nuisance that averted his plans to become the king. He was conniving and smart, so he orchestrated a wildebeest stampede and tempted the young prince into its path, where he found himself in great danger and cried out for help.

His father, the great king of the Pride Lands, came to rescue his son. But Mufasa fell over a cliff, barely hanging on to the edge with his front claws. The last image showed Scar stalking over to his brother, as if to save him. Scar leered at his brother.

“Long live the king,” he said with a sneer. Then he scratched at Mufasa’s paws, causing him to lose his grip and fall...

“‘To his death,’” Silas read in the barest whisper, his voice choked by fear—and also recognition. “‘After that day, Simba ran away in shame,’” he read on, “‘thinking it was all his fault, leaving Scar to inherit the throne, just as he had planned.’”

Silas looked up in shock. The twins met his gaze. He could tell they were all thinking the same thing. He tapped the book.

“Doesn’t that sound familiar?” Silas said, pointing to the picture of Mufasa falling.

“Whoa, that’s like what happened to your dad,” Timothy said, studying the drawing.

“That’s an awfully big coincidence,” Natasha added.

They both sounded unconvinced.

“But...what if it isn’t a coincidence?” Silas said, feeling fear running rampant through his body like a virus, infecting every part of him.

“What are you saying?” Natasha said.

Silence hung over the cabin, crushing them with its heavy weight. The sun was arcing down toward evening, covering their camp in dark shadows, which seemed so much more menacing now. Finally, Silas forced the words out.

“Do you think someone tampered with the bridge to cause it to break?”



The pebble kicked by Silas's foot skittered ahead and fell off the bridge, plunging into the ravine below. *Splash.* It broke the murky surface of the creek, only a seeming trickle winding through the sharp rocks that had injured his father.

Silas peered over the edge of the bridge, which had been repaired since the accident. His head swam and he grew dizzy. Fresh guilt churned in his gut as the day of the accident came back full force.

Suddenly, someone gripped his arm—and kept him in place. He jerked his head around.

“Be careful,” Natasha said, holding him steady with her voice and her hand. “The bridge might be fixed, but it’s still a long way down.”

“Ugh, you’re telling me,” Timothy said, right behind her. Anxiously, he looked into the ravine. “Let’s get across—before I change my mind.”

Silas flashed them a sheepish smile. He had let his fear—and his imagination—run wild again, imagining that he was like that tiny pebble skittering and plummeting over the edge. He shook his head to clear it and

forged ahead toward the other side of the bridge. He felt steady and able to reach it this time because of one thing.

He wasn't alone this time.

Having friends did make even the worst things better. For some reason, he had thought that he had to come alone to prove his bravery when he first tried to reach the Elephant Graveyard. But maybe a friend was like courage itself embodied in a person. Maybe Tarzan and all the great heroes were brave because they had someone like Jane by their side.

Buoyed by that thought, he led the way across the rope bridge, which swayed with each step but held up and didn't snap. They clambered onto solid ground and looked back. Silas felt a sense of accomplishment—they'd made it to the other side. But it was quickly replaced by dread as he remembered Scar.

"Think this will help us find Zazu?" Timothy asked, scanning the treetops, hoping for a glimpse of the lost parrot. "I really miss that funny bird."

"Well, if it's all connected," Natasha said thoughtfully, "the bridge...the accident...the chest, and the ghostly lion...then maybe...it's possible."

"Don't worry," Silas said. "We're going to find him. And figure out why this is happening." He tried to sound brave, but his voice wavered. Still, he meant every word.

They got to work inspecting the bridge and the ropes that anchored it to the boulders, looking for any clues as to why they had snapped before. Silas ran his hands over the fresh knots. The new ropes were a lighter shade than the old ones and were made out of what looked like nylon or synthetic fiber.

The old ropes had been made of natural fibers and were fraying quite badly. He turned away in frustration. Maybe it was only an accident and nothing more. Could it be his overactive imagination trying to make sense of something terrible that had happened?

Often, horrible things had no explanation that made sense. They were simply bad.

"Find anything?" he called to the twins, who were inspecting another rope.

"Not yet," Natasha said, sounding equally defeated. "Plus, I was thinking. If someone wanted you to fall, or your dad to get hurt...who was it?"

“That’s the problem,” Silas said. “I don’t know—only that it wasn’t Scar. I opened the chest *after* the accident when my dad got hurt.”

“Jeez, you’re right,” Timothy said, sifting sand through his hands. “That means...”

“Scar was still locked away,” Natasha finished for him with a knowing look. “Where your aunt imprisoned him with the staff,” she added.

Silas clutched it tighter.

“You’re right,” he said in frustration. “But who would want to hurt us? I know some of the townsfolk aren’t happy about my family taking over the camp. But would they actually try to hurt us...or worse?”

Natasha shook her head. “And if so, why would they come help repair the bridge? Also, they’d have to be like super smart for this plan to work,” she went on. “Like evil-genius smart.”

Silas felt overwhelmed by all the mysteries. He tramped over behind the boulder and kicked at the sand in annoyance. He felt the staff pulse and jolt him.

“What the—” he started, but then he looked down by his feet.

That was when he saw something. He picked it out, pulling it from the sand where it had been buried. It was the old rope from the bridge...only it didn’t look like it had frayed.

The end looked like someone had sawed through it. His mouth gaped open, but then the staff pulsed again. He whipped around, his foot nudging something else buried in the sand.

“What is it?” Natasha said as they both rushed over to see it

“Oh, no...” Silas said, holding it up.

It was a rusty saw.

“And look at the end of this rope,” Silas said. “What does it look like to you?”

“Like...somebody cut through it,” Timothy said in a pinched voice.

“With that saw,” Natasha added, pointing to the rusty tool. “And then they tried to hide the evidence by burying it in the sand. But...how in the world did you find it?”

Silas held the staff, shaking the gourds on the top.

“The camp spirit...the staff led me to it.”

“But who would do this?” Natasha asked, running her finger along the saw’s edge. The blade was dull and rusty but still ridged and sharp enough to cut through old decaying ropes.

“I don’t know,” Silas said. “All I’m sure about is that somebody doesn’t want my family here.”

The enormity of what they’d found weighed on them—that meant someone really had tried to harm his family. But who could it be? And how did that connect to the ghostly lion haunting the camp...and Zazu going missing? And everything else going on?

They were all stumped.

The sun was starting to set, and they only had a little daylight left. Silas dug for the strength to ask about the other mystery, the one that had been lingering like a ghost since before they even arrived at Camp Pride Rock. The twins knew way more than they were telling him. After all, they’d been here when his aunt died, but their mom had told them to keep quiet.

“What *really* happened to Aunt Scarlett?” Silas said at long last. “Please, you have to tell me. And, well...maybe...it’ll help us figure out why all of this is happening.”

The twins exchanged looks. Silas worried they’d hold out on him, like they had up to that point.

But then Natasha grabbed his arm.

“Come with me,” she said. “It’s better if we show you....”



“Hurry up, follow me,” Natasha said.

“Where’re you taking me?”

They didn’t answer, just waved him forward.

Silas felt like more of a scaredy-cat the farther he trekked into the hills, following the twins. They moved at a rapid clip, clearly familiar with the path. The underbrush scratched at his shins, drawing blood, while rocks threatened to twist his ankle. He used the staff to keep his balance and find solid footing.

They hiked farther away from the rope bridge. The terrain grew wilder and rockier, winding up the mesa. The trail dissolved into wilderness as a faint chill settled into the air. The sun moved lower, elongating the shadows cast by the scraggly trees and signaling that nightfall was coming soon.

They crested the hill and came to a halt. Silas frowned in confusion. They’d come to a wide plateau. While the rest of the Pride Lands boasted prickly trees and scraggly underbrush growing in sand, this place was rocky and destitute of any vegetation. No birds flew through the skies.

It looked completely desolate and bereft of any life, but then he spotted...

Paw prints.

Three sets of them.

Coyotes? he wondered. *Or maybe hyenas?*

That thought jarred him. He remembered how the three hyenas stalked him the other night. All he knew was that nothing good lurked here.

But the twins were undeterred. They continued onward. Mist clung to the air, steaming out of vents in the ground, giving the whole place a supernatural vibe. Water bubbled up from the vents, too, trickling through the rocky ground in thin rivulets.

"Careful, that's super hot," Natasha said. "It's geothermal...from deep underground."

"That means it comes from lava," Timothy added. "She just likes to use big words."

"Magma, not lava," Natasha corrected.

"What're we doing here?" Silas asked, feeling unsettled by this strange, unforgiving place.

Neither of the twins answered with words. Instead, Natasha pointed straight ahead.

ELEPHANT GRAVEYARD

Silas gulped hard at the sight of the familiar words carved into the wooden sign that was staked into the ground. It was so weather-beaten from wind and sand that it was nearly illegible.

"This is the Elephant Graveyard?" Silas said in surprise. Now he could see why this was a place that only the bravest campers could venture.

He scanned the flat plateau at the top of the hill, which looked like it could exist on Mars.

"You betcha," Natasha said.

"But why's it called that?" Silas asked, curious but also fearing the answer.

"Over there, look..." Natasha gestured ahead.

Silas followed her gaze, then startled back. He'd thought they were just strange rocks, but now it became clear that they were *bones*. Whatever

animal they came from was enormous. The ribs arced out of the ground, half buried.

“How’d they get here?” Silas asked, recalling his books. “Elephants don’t live in North America.”

“Maybe from woolly mammoths,” Natasha said with a shrug. “From back in prehistoric times. When all the continents were connected by land bridges. We learned about it in school.”

“Yeah, they’re like the ancestors of elephants,” Timothy added helpfully. “Only they had hair, cuz back then, it was the Ice Age and super cold.”

“That’s right,” Silas said. “I read about it in my books. After the dinosaurs died out.”

“Yup, that’s what we think,” Natasha said. “But nobody knows for sure how the bones got here.”

That mystery, not to mention the graveyard itself, gave the whole place a disturbing feeling.

Silas swallowed hard. “What’re we doing here?”

He tried to keep his fear under control, reminding himself that he had the staff for protection, but it felt like a flimsy defense. He tightened his grip until his fingers felt numb.

“Well...you asked what happened to your aunt...” Natasha said, gesturing around the graveyard. “This is where they found her body....”

“Her body?” Silas said in a strangled voice. Suddenly, *graveyard* took on an even darker meaning. “You mean, she was already dead?”

The twins nodded grimly.

“But why was she here?” Silas choked out, feeling like a cat was clawing his tongue.

“Right, nobody really knows,” Natasha went on. She knelt down and sifted rocks through her hands, coming up with a piece of turquoise. “She went out hiking with Zazu, then never came back. When they finally found her...there wasn’t much left....”

She trailed off, not wanting to say any more.

Silas felt his heart lurch. But he needed answers.

“How’d they find her?” he asked, imagining that it hadn’t been easy.

“Oh, it was Zazu,” Timothy said, peering up at the misty sky, seemingly hoping the parrot would reappear. “He always went with her everywhere. He flew back to camp and led them to Scarlett’s body....”

Natasha set her lips. "Yeah, we heard Rafi talking to Mom about it. He said that when they found her...it looked like a wild animal got her."

"A *hungry* one," Timothy added with a shudder.

That freaked Silas out even more. He remembered the hyenas and the paw prints. His heart raced faster, as if trying to run out of his chest. It took him a moment to find his voice.

"But why...didn't you tell me?" he asked, feeling hurt.

"Mom warned us not to talk about it," Natasha said, looking down at her feet. "She was afraid that it would cause bad press...or worse...scare your family away."

"Yeah, when we heard that Scarlett had a brother who was coming to fix up the camp and reopen it, like back in the old days," Timothy said, "it was like our prayers got answered. My mom didn't wanna ruin it. And neither did we..."

"Sorry we didn't tell you sooner," Natasha said, exchanging guilty looks with her brother.

Timothy nodded. "It wasn't lying—but it was sort of lying."

"I accept your apology," Silas said.

The twins brightened, but then the somber mood descended on them again. The sun set lower, and the air cooled considerably. A lone coyote took up its mournful howl in the distance. But still, Silas didn't want to leave yet. He had one important question burning hot in his mind.

"Do you think the same thing that happened to me and my dad...maybe happened to my aunt?" he asked in a soft voice. "Like it wasn't really...an accident?"

His words hung in the air before the mist stole them away, like a ghost swallowing the sound. The twins looked at him with fresh worry lighting up their hazel eyes.

"What do you mean?" Natasha asked. "You don't think it was just a terrible accident?"

"Yeah, who would want to hurt her?" Timothy added, sounding equally unsure.

"Right...I don't know," Silas said, feeling frustrated. He kicked at the loose rocks.

He didn't have any proof of his theory, let alone any idea who would want to hurt his family. Just a bad feeling that there was a lot more to the story than they knew.

Ring!

Both of the twins' phones pinged at the exact same time. Then Silas felt his phone chirp in his pocket. Their parents were summoning them back for dinner.

Why did every investigation only lead to more mysteries? Nothing made sense. Silas wanted to stay and snoop for more clues. But he didn't have a choice. Plus, it would be dangerous to stay out in the Elephant Graveyard after dark. The paw prints were a warning.

The twins' words echoed through his head.

It looked like a wild animal got her...a hungry one.

Before their parents could text again, they each wrote back—*on my way*—and hurried back, moving faster since they were hiking more downhill. Before they clambered back over the bridge, they hid the rusty saw in some brush, making sure it was covered with sand. It was an important clue. Then they wobbled in tandem back across the rope bridge.

"Zazu!" Timothy called to the sky, turning around. "Zazu! Zazu! Please come home...."

But no bird answered his calls.

"Don't worry, we'll find him," Silas said, patting his shoulder. "I'm sure he'll return soon."

They turned to leave, but Silas glanced at the archway warning sign. Suddenly, it hit him.

"Wait, remember what Zazu used to say?" he asked, pointing to it.

They imitated him and cawed, "Danger...danger...beware...the arch...keep out!"

"Exactly," Silas said. "Think Zazu was trying to warn me about the bridge?"

"It's possible," Natasha said, sounding unsure. "But he always talked a lot of nonsense."

"Yeah, even before your aunt died," Timothy added. "Mom says they were both *eccentric*. Whatever that means." He shrugged.

"Dictionary, remember?" Natasha said. "It means *unconventional or strange*."

Timothy brightened. "Oh yeah, that sounds like Scarlett."

"Well, I wish I could've spent more time with her," Silas said, feeling a stab of regret. It felt like guilt, but deeper and sadder, as if you'd lost

something that you could never get back, no matter how hard you tried. “I’m really sorry I didn’t know her like you all did.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Natasha said. “At least you got to know us...and Zazu, too. Maybe his cawing was a clue? Or maybe, it was a bunch of random words? Who knows?”

Silas let out a deep sigh. Again, more mysteries piled up than answers.
Ring! Ring!

Their phones all pinged again. This time, the messages were more demanding, with their parents’ threatening to send out the search brigade if they didn’t return soon.

Sometimes parental worrying felt suffocating, and sometimes it felt like love, though maybe they were the same thing. This time it felt like comfort and safety, Silas realized. He was grateful for his parents, even if they didn’t always understand him and—worse—had given him a little brother who was supposed to be his best friend, but instead terrorized their whole family.

“Hurry, we’d better get back,” Natasha said. “Let’s look for more clues tomorrow.”

* * *

But all through dinner in the mess hall—cheese enchiladas with black beans and green chiles that were beyond delicious, despite the spicy burn that lingered long after, which only icy-cold lemonade could quench—Silas felt deeply unsettled.

He couldn’t stop thinking about Zazu and the rusty saw. One thing was clear. The bridge’s breaking wasn’t an accident. The ropes were severed by that saw they found. That made him shiver. Then his thoughts leapt to the ghostly lion named Scar and the book from the shelf.

But how did it all connect?

Only half paying attention, he brushed his teeth, and Dad wished him good night from the sofa. He trudged to bed, deeply lost in thought. The mysteries cycled through his head over and over. The twins were right. He hadn’t gotten the staff and opened the chest until *after* the accident on the bridge. That meant it wasn’t Scar, as he was still locked away at that time.

So...who sabotaged the bridge, then?

The harder he thought, the less sense it all made. He sighed in frustration for the hundredth time. He took the old book about Scar to bed

with him, flipping through the pages again for more clues. He ran his fingers over the title that was etched into the hardback cover.

THE LEGEND OF SCAR

Silas stopped on an elaborate full-page image of the lion, lounging on the throne, after he'd caused his brother's death and his nephew to run away in exile, thinking that it was all his fault.

Scar stared out of the page with his eerie green eyes. They were sharp and sinister—

“Boo!” he seemed to growl.

Silas flinched at that, but then calmed. It was only a picture, after all. The lion in the book couldn't hurt him. That was why he loved books. Reading was the safest way to have adventures and learn about dangerous animals. Relaxing, he flipped to the next page. Then he spotted something that made him sit up in alarm. Three creatures with bristled fur knelt in front of Scar on his throne, pledging their allegiance to him.

And not just any creatures.

Hyenas.

Silas remembered how the three hyenas had stalked and chased him home the other night.

Could they be the same ones? But how?

With a deep shudder, Silas shut the book, thinking better of trying to read before bed. He flipped off his light and tried to sleep. But he tossed and turned, moving in and out of dreams where he was falling, or being hunted.... Then something startled him awake.

Thump. Thump. Silence. Thump. Thump.

They were drumbeats.

Thin moonlight streamed through the curtains like pale shards. His window was shut tight. The air was stuffy, circulated by the ceiling fan churning overhead. Silas strained his ears, listening in the darkness of his room. He remembered the photographs in the mess hall with the campers banging drums. He tensed up, worrying that it was happening again.

The silence endured and lengthened.

“Just a bad dream,” he said without surprise. Lately, his nights had been filled with them. Not to mention all the freaky things that happened that

day. He settled back into bed, accidentally knocking the book about Scar onto the floor with a solid thud.

It splayed open to the two-page spread of the lion lounging on his ill-gotten throne. Scar's eyes started glowing, lighting up the room with unnatural emerald light.

"No...that can't be..." Silas gasped. "It's only a book...it's not real...."

As if in response, the lion's eyes fixed on Silas.

Thump. Thump. Silence. Thump. Thump.

The eerie drumbeats started up again, louder this time. They reverberated through the night. And then, as if joining the chorus, creepy laughter echoed through the campground.

"Heee-heee-hehe-heeeeee!"

The hyenas were back.

Silas sat up in bed and pinched himself—*hard!*

But this was no dream. He was fully awake. That was when something worse happened. Scar reached his paw out from the pages of the book and slowly dragged his claws over the floorboards...*scrraatch*...They cut deep gouges into the wood with that terrible sound.

Then, with a growl, Scar stepped out of the pages of the book.

"No...please...leave me alone," Silas tried to scream, but his voice came out as barely a whisper. He cowered back in fear—unable to believe his eyes or ears—as the thumping drumbeats and bloodcurdling laughter reached a fever pitch outside his window.

Then Scar grew taller and taller—and leered down at him. The ghostly lion could only be seen in shadow, aside from his green eyes. They glowed like two fiery emeralds lit ablaze.

His unmistakable voice rang out—

"Sweet cub, don't be afraid."



“No, you’re not real...you came out of a book....”

Silas stared at the ghostly lion in shock. His voice was a gasp, choked off by the fear running rampant through his body. His breathing sped up as he tensed on his bed.

The lion reared back and laughed as a sinister smile twisted at his jaws. His eyes glowed with emerald light, but his voice sounded weirdly calm and alluring.

“Oh, the lad doth protest too much, methinks,” he drawled in his accented voice that sounded like it came from a different age, or even from a book.

The book.

Silas jerked his gaze to *The Legend of Scar*. The drawing that the lion had crept from, obvious by the claw marks trailing away from it that had been gouged into the floorboards, now showed only an empty throne with the three hyenas bowing down before it.

He'd escaped from the book—though it seemed unreal beyond any possibility—and stood in his room. He growled in a low purr and aimed one claw at Silas. Or rather, at the walking stick, which leaned against the bed. Silas had been sleeping with it lately.

“All I seek is the staff...no more, no less...so hand it over to your king, little cub.” His voice turned dark and threatening on that last part.

Silas tried to think fast. If he gave the lion the staff, would this nightmare—the kind you couldn't wake up from because it was your life—finally be over? That idea brought with it a feeling of sweet relief that he'd found a way to fix everything.

But then his eyes darted back to the book. His heart sank as dread rushed back in. The staff was the key to the camp spirit, but there was more. From the story in the book, he knew better than to trust this lion, and knew what happened to anyone who made that mistake. He remembered what Scar had done to his brother—clawed his paws so he plunged off the cliff to his death—and how he'd made his little nephew cub believe it was all his fault.

The warning was clear.

Scar was evil and sinister and always plotting. He only looked out for himself. He wanted to be king and rule everything, no matter what it took or who got hurt in his quest for power. That meant Scar wanted his aunt's staff for reasons that couldn't be good. The staff had powers. Silas had witnessed them on more than one occasion.

To give this ghostly lion even more power...well, he didn't want to think about it.

The idea was too frightening and terrible. There was a reason that his aunt had locked Scar away in that chest.

“Do not dawdle, little prince,” Scar said in a bored voice. He sounded a bit put out. “Trust me, better to do this the easy way....”

“Okay,” Silas said, still thinking fast.

“Oh, that's better,” Scar said.

He reached his claw out for the staff. The dark shadow stretched across the room, which was illuminated by the lion's glowing green eyes.

Silas grabbed for the staff, as if to hand it over...

But instead, he wielded it like a weapon.

“No, stay back! You killed your brother...and you hurt my father in that accident....”

The staff pulsed with light, repelling Scar. He snarled, crouching back from it. Then he recovered slightly and rolled his eyes.

“I’m surrounded by idiots! As much as I’d love to take credit for that whole bridge fiasco, I have far too much pride. That wasn’t me, little cub.”

Silas already suspected as much, but he’d wanted confirmation from the lion.

And now he had it.

“Hand it over!” Scar snarled as the hyenas took up their creepy laughter outside.

Scar swiped for the staff again, but Silas rapped at him with it. The magic in the staff exploded out in a burst of red fire—and fought the lion off.

Scar yelped in pain and clutched his wounded paw, then vanished in a puff of red smoke. Even the hyenas fell silent, as if they knew their king had been defeated.

Silas couldn’t believe it—*he had done it!*

He defeated the ghostly lion, thanks to the staff. Instead of running away, or calling for help, he stood up and fought back, even though he was afraid. His father was right. Courage wasn’t found in going to look for trouble—it was how you acted when the trouble found you.

He almost couldn’t believe it. He sank back into his bed, keeping the staff close...just in case. He listened to the darkness—but it remained still and quiet. Not even the coyotes or screech owls dared to break it. He’d fixed it...everything would go back to normal now.

“I did it...” Silas whispered in awe.

For the first time in his whole life, he didn’t feel like a coward. He kept expecting Scar to reappear all night. But when he checked the book, the lion was back on his throne in the image, where he belonged. With a triumphant smile, he gazed down at the picture.

Silas smiled—and shut the book with a satisfying thud. He kicked it under his bed for good measure. The night remained quiet and calm... blessedly silent. With a contented sigh, he sank into his pillow, still clutching the staff that had protected him and defeated the ghostly lion.

Finally, at long last, he fell into a deep sleep full of happy dreams, where his father was fully healed and had restored the camp to its former glory. Excited campers streamed through the entrance and into the huts and mess hall, filling the camp with their laughter and chatter.

He woke the next morning to bright sunlight, with a smile still plastered to his face from his dream. That was all going to come true now. He yawned lazily and lay back.

But then—

Shrill screams pierced the morning air. And not just any screams.

It was his mother.

The screaming resolved into words. She sounded panic-stricken.

“Oh, no...George...he’s missing!”



“George...where could he be!” his mother cried.

Her panicked voice reverberated through the cabin. Silas leapt out of his bed. Terror overtook him like a strong tide. He bolted down the hall into the master bedroom.

“Someone took him!” Mom said, standing over the bassinet next to the bed.

She was beside herself and fraught with emotion, while Dad hobbled around the room in a panic, looking everywhere for the baby, even though George was too little to go anywhere on his own. His father looked under the bed, then limped over to inspect the closet.

Silas watched the scene unfold in slow motion, as if it was something out of a horror movie. The window in their room was wide open—but the screen and curtains had been shredded, as if by razor-sharp claws. They flapped in the gentle morning breeze.

Oh, no, Silas thought, backing away in terror. He had a horrible feeling about what happened. That was when he saw it—

Gouged into the wall above the bed was a message. Jagged claw marks, similar to the ones on his bedroom floor, slashed the words into the wall.

BRING ME THE STAFF...OR ELSE!

Silas read the words in disbelief, but the meaning was clear. Scar had kidnapped his baby brother. And worse—*this was all his fault*. Guilt swept through him, nearly paralyzing him.

How foolish he was to think that he had beaten the conniving lion. He remembered the book and how Scar always got revenge in a way that hurt his sworn enemy the most. Threatening a helpless baby to get what he wanted...well, sadly, this had his paw prints all over it.

“Rafi, Sara, and Archie are on their way...” Dad said, hurrying over to console his wife. “I also called the police, but they’re over an hour away. They’ll get here as soon as they can...”

Silas wanted to be in that family hug, but he felt like he didn’t deserve the comfort. His cowardice rose up again, along with a feeling of foolishness and deep guilt that he’d brought this on his family by releasing Scar from his imprisonment.

I should’ve given him the staff when I had the chance, Silas thought, remembering the previous night. Then at least his baby brother would be safe and sound in his bassinet.

Terrible thoughts flashed through his head, overwhelming him. His breathing sped up and his heart thumped faster...and faster...it told him one thing over and over...

Run.

He had to get out of there—quick.

Silas sprang into action, his limbs unfreezing. He hurried to his bedroom while his parents were distracted and grabbed the hiking backpack Dad had bought him for the trip to Arizona. Bet his father didn’t think this was how it would first get used.

Moving quickly, he stuffed a blanket, his flashlight, and his nature survival book into it. He got dressed—lightweight pants and a shirt. Then he tugged on socks and his hiking boots. Lastly, he strapped his jacket to the pack, knowing how the nights turned cold fast.

Silas grabbed the staff—the very thing that had started much of this trouble. And he hoped it would have the power to put an end to it. Plus, it could protect him.

His last stop was the kitchen for a quick stock-up. He grabbed a box of granola bars and a jar of peanut butter, shoving them into his pack. Lastly, he filled his bottle with water.

He took one final look around, sadness sweeping over him. But through the window, he saw Sara and Rafi making their way up the hill toward the cabin.

He couldn't bear to face them. He didn't have much time.

Run. Run. Run.

His heart said it with each beat.

They were almost to the front door. It was now—or never.

Thump. Thump. Thump-thump.

His heart made his legs kick into motion and carry him to the back door. His body moved of its own volition, as if on autopilot, while his thoughts swam in confusing circles. He paused at the slider. He knew that he should go back—try to make everything right somehow.

But he couldn't bear to see the disappointment in his parents' eyes. *They'll never love me the same way again if they find out the truth*, he thought. Better to run away.

Tears pricked at his eyes, while his throat felt thick with sorrow. He stood in the doorway for one more long moment, knowing this was the last time he would have a home.

Then, before his parents could notice, Silas slipped through the door and headed for the hiking trails that led away from the campground and into the wilderness of the Pride Lands. Luckily, his parents were too panicked and distracted looking for George to notice anything else.

Good night, sweet prince.

The refrain uttered by Scar popped into his head, and it felt oddly appropriate for this moment. Silas looked back one more time. His home—his new home, the cabin that had once belonged to his aunt—stood behind him. He could see his parents through the window to their bedroom, standing by the bassinet, holding each other. His mom was crying softly.

“Good night, sweet prince,” Silas whispered to the cabin, to his parents, to his poor little brother. His words whispered out, then vanished into the thin air like ghosts.

And then he was gone.

It's all my fault. It's all my fault.

That refrain repeated in Silas's head like a bad song as he ran away from home. Foolhardily, he had believed that he defeated Scar—the legendary lion. Like that was possible.

He let out a derisive snort. He couldn't believe his own arrogance. Every time he tried to fix things, he only succeeded in making them much worse.

He moved at a brisk pace. His boots thunked onto the gravelly trail, but soon he left that behind for sandy terrain. His backpack hung heavily on his shoulders, but the weight also pushed him onward. He used the staff for balance and to feel his way.

Now he understood why his aunt had carried it everywhere. All that was missing, he realized, was Zazu perched on the gourds and cawing away.

Where was he going? He didn't know for sure. He just had to get as far away from his family as possible before they discovered what he'd done. They'd be so disappointed in him. But it was more than that.

He was a menace, he thought, feeling more guilt twist at his heart. The best thing was to leave behind anyone that he could hurt. He was the reason that his father fell and broke his leg and cracked his ribs. He was the reason that Scar got free. He was the reason that his baby brother George got kidnapped.

It's all my fault. It's all my fault.

Each thought made him feel worse than the one that came before. If he stayed, more terrible tragedies were sure to befall his relatives. It meant that his story—the story of the Reyes family—would not have a happy ending. They'd end up like Scar's family.

Tears pricked his eyes. This time, he let them fall freely. He didn't care anymore. He was weak and cowardly. Running away was the best thing for...

Everyone.

The guilt propelled him onward, driving him to get far away from home. Soon enough, after following the trail for a few miles, he reached the edge of the camp marked by a fence.

DANGER—KEEP OUT! read the signs marking the perimeter.

But he ignored them and slipped through the slats in the fencing, which were loose and easy to slide through. He was skinny for his age. The last thing he did was turn his phone off so his parents couldn't message or track

him. Sooner rather than later, they were bound to come out of their shocked trance and realize that he was gone. But by then, it would be too late.

He felt guilt again, this time for causing them more grief. But he reminded himself that they were better off without him. He was the one who should be wearing a **DANGER—KEEP OUT** sign, he thought glumly.

The phone's screen went blank—dark and empty—which was how he felt on the inside.

It's to protect them, he reassured himself.

But still, that didn't squash the horrible guilt that churned in his gut.

With a deep sigh, he tucked his phone away into his pack, then kept hiking. He got deeper into the mesas, following trails likely trampled by wild animals. No humans lived this far out into the wilderness. He didn't see one road or structure, like a cabin or house, the whole way. Overhead, vultures circled lazily in the sky. But their eyes were sharp—and even hopeful.

The creatures were scavengers, meaning they picked off fallen prey. Silas knew this from his books. Their proximity meant that he looked like a promising target for their next meal. He tried not to think about it. Soon he reached a forest of sorts.

This wasn't like the lush wilderness of Florida, which was densely overgrown. These trees were bent and scraggly with prickly leaves. He stopped to drink water from his bottle and eat a granola bar, careful to ration them for the journey ahead.

Soon enough, as the day progressed and turned to evening, the sun started to sink. He had a bad feeling about it. The trees turned into shadowy monsters with claws reaching out to grab him. He shook his head. *It's just a trick of light and shadow*, he reassured himself. The trees couldn't attack him unless he wandered into their thorns. He stuck to the trail.

His fingers twitched absently. He was tempted to check his phone. But he forced himself to leave it alone, or they'd find him. He was a coward... he deserved to be alone.

The sun set behind the trees, casting the whole forest into shade and summoning the nighttime symphonies. The screech owls took up their terrible cries, which echoed through the wilderness. He heard movement in the brush. The scampering of tiny feet.

Probably just mice and gophers.

That was what the owls were hunting. They were nighttime predators. He was too big for the birds of prey to hunt. He relaxed slightly and kept moving through the forest.

The last vestiges of sunlight painted the sky. At some point, he'd need to stop to rest and make camp. But the adrenaline was too fresh in his blood to allow for any sleep. Plus, he needed to stay alert and get far away. It would be safer to take a nap in the morning sunlight.

He kept tramping into the dusk. Finally fatigue crept into his limbs, making him clumsy.

Then—

His boot caught on a rock. It sent him flying forward with a horrible suddenness. He barely caught himself, scraping his hands badly on some rocks.

I'm okay, he told himself as he got up and dusted off his pants.

Bits of sand stung his abrasions.

He peered up at the sky. A million stars started to poke through the black velvet expanse on one side of the horizon. The sun hadn't fully set, nor had the moon risen. This moment was that unsettling time between day and night, when the sky was divided.

He'd lost track of time in the rush to get away, and his phone was still turned off. But it was getting late. *Just a few more hours*, he told himself, *and I can finally get some rest.*

Eerie laughter cut through the trees.

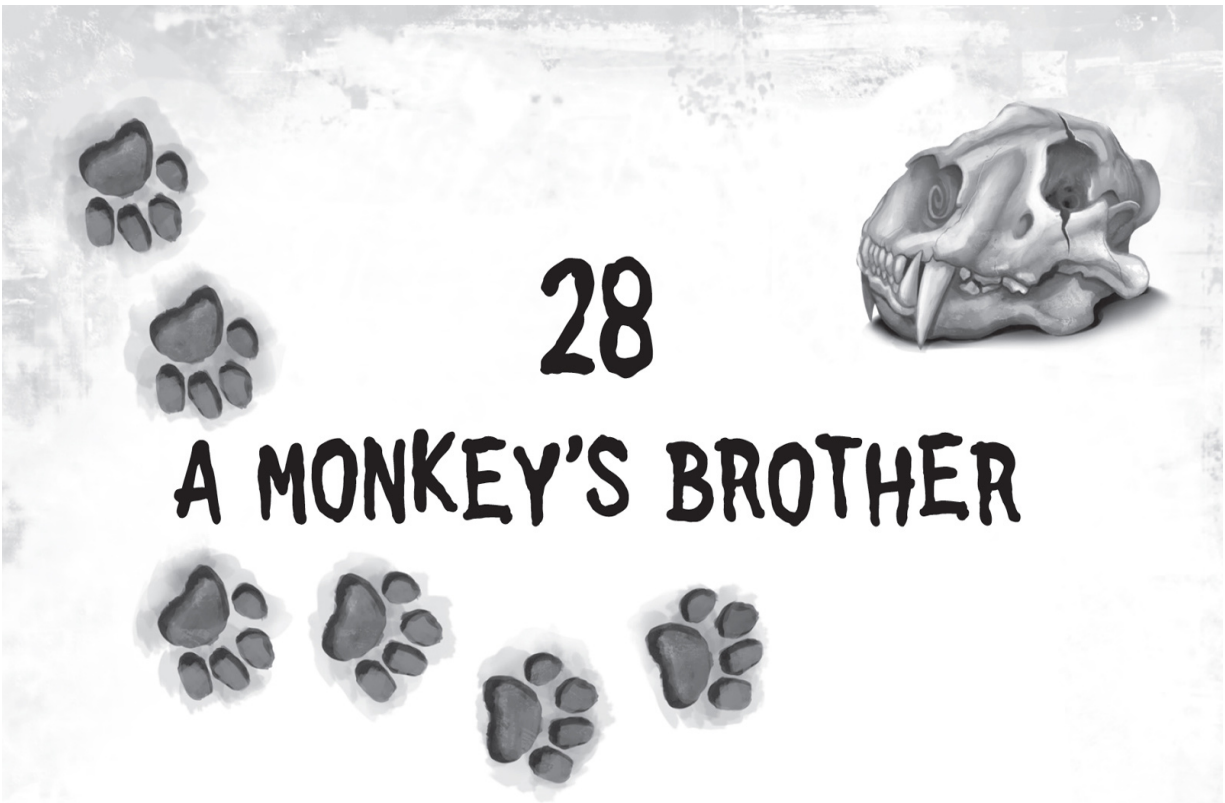
"Hee-heeeee-hehe-heeeee!"

Something large rustled in the brush ahead. Silas backed away in fear. Then more laughter came from behind him this time. He spun around again. Now it echoed out from his right. It sounded like there were three of them—the hyenas had him surrounded.

And they were closing in.

That was when a female voice rang out—

"Well, well, well, Banzai! What have we got here?"



“**H**mm, I don’t know, Shenzi,” a male voice answered. “Looks like a monkey’s brother. Uh, what do you think, Ed?”

Silas felt even more afraid now that he heard the hyenas *talking*. That was when two of them stepped out of the brush. They had the same spotted fur that bristled up their backs, and sharp teeth. Their eyes glowed bright green. Silas remembered the picture from the book, where they knelt before Scar. But where was the third one?

Behind him a bird emerged from the trees and took off, flying away, clearly frightened off by the fearsome creatures. And then—

The third hyena burst into the clearing. This one had wild eyes. His tongue lolled out of his jaws. “Ohhhhhh, hehe, hahahah!” he laughed.

They had Silas trapped between them. The hyenas started stalking toward him and closing in. Their hackles were raised and their teeth bared. They meant business.

“Going somewhere?” Shenzi, the female one, said.

Then they all cackled with heinous laughter.

Silas backed away, but he had nowhere to go—he was still trapped. He thought fast, trying to remember everything that he knew about hyenas from his books.

Their laughter was more creepy than silly, and it told a truth about them. Hyenas were efficient and deadly, preying on wildebeests, monkeys, zebras, and other creatures much larger than them. They hunted in packs, using their numbers to overwhelm and trap their prey.

Just like these three.

The laughter could also be a tool used to startle and disorient their victims. They stalked closer.

And it worked, Silas thought as they unleashed more giggles, making him jump from terror. Now they were only a mere five feet away. A few more steps and they'd pounce and take him down like a weak lion cub. He gritted his teeth—and raised the staff, then swung it at Ed.

The staff lit up with red light and released a zap that hit the hyena.

Ed yelped in surprise and cowered back.

That gave Silas a chance.

He ran for it, dodging the injured hyena and taking off blindly through the trees. He could hear them giggling and tearing after him. The staff had surprised them, but they were smart and would learn, just like they learned to avoid his flashlight beam on the way back to the cabin.

He turned right, then left, hoping to throw them off his trail, then clambered through a stream. The cold water sloshed into his boots and soaked his socks. The sky had a little light left, but soon darkness would envelop him and make him easier prey for the hyenas.

He didn't have much time.

When he heard giggles, he veered the other way. He quickly lost his direction and became disoriented. Slowly, their footsteps grew silent. Had they lost his scent?

He kept running full speed.

But then—

He hit a dead end.

The trail funneled into a canyon without an exit. He tried to climb, but slid back down. The sandy cliffs were steep and crumbled in his grip. The only way out was to go back.

"Go ahead, try it again," the female voice giggled. "I love watching you struggle...."

The hyenas stepped into the mouth of the canyon. They hadn't lost his scent after all. They just took a different route, knowing how to corner him in this trap. They'd herded him this way on purpose.

He gripped the staff tightly. He had been able to fight off one of them—but three hyenas? They would outnumber and overpower him.

He tried to think of a way out. Desperation clawed at his heart, making it beat so fast it felt like it was going to burst. But this was his last hope.

"Nooooo, please," he begged them.

"Please...what?" Banzai said. "That's not a full sentence. Shenzi, what ya think he means?"

"Maybe he means 'please eat me,'" Shenzi cracked back.

Their giggles rang out in delight.

Ed didn't speak words. He just stared at Silas with his wild eyes and lolling tongue. But somehow that was worse than the talking and wisecracks. The hyenas advanced on him.

Silas backed up, but then he hit the wall of the canyon. He was stuck.

"Scar's orders," Shenzi said. "Too bad. I kind of like you, kid. You've got spunk."

"Yeah, we need that staff for the big guy," Banzai added with a leer. "Plus, I'm hungry."

"Hee-hee...me too," Shenzi said, then cocked her head at Ed. "And he's always famished."

Ed licked his lips, then retracted his tongue into his jowls. The hyenas reared back to pounce—

A rope dropped, hitting Silas in the head.

He looked up, startled....

It was the twins. And they weren't alone.

Zazu flew with them, circling overhead.

"Silas, hurry...climb!"



Silas stared up in surprise. The twins gestured at him frantically to start climbing the rope.

“What’re you waiting for?” Timothy yelled from the top of the canyon. “Hurry up!”

“Oh, no, they’re coming...” Natasha gasped.

Silas strapped the staff to his backpack using the ties, then jumped up and grabbed the rope. He scrambled up as fast as he could. The rope was rough and fraying, tearing at his palms. It looked like the one from the bridge that had been sawed through. But it held his weight. He kept climbing.

“Get the cub!” Shenzi howled. “Scar’s orders!”

Silas felt something snap at his heels. The near miss drew his attention. He looked down in alarm. The hyenas launched themselves into the air, trying to bite his feet and pull him down. He swayed precariously, trying to dodge their deadly teeth.

Banzai missed completely, while Shenzi clipped his boot and tore off a big chunk of rubber—but Ed sank his sharp teeth deep into Silas’s pant leg.

“Oh, noooooo!” Silas screamed as he started to lose his hold on the rope.

One hand slipped....

He dangled by the other, barely keeping his grip. But Ed dug in, twisting his neck and thrashing around, trying to dislodge Silas. And to make matters worse, the staff began to slip from his pack.

He gasped in fear. If the hyenas got the staff, they’d deliver it to Scar. But it was his only way to get back his little brother—his only bargaining chip.

“Hold on,” Natasha called. The twins started chucking rocks and debris at the coyotes.

Shenzi and Banzai yelped and backed off, but Ed wasn’t so easily dissuaded from his prey. The third hyena held on. Silas felt his fingers slipping...one...then two...

A dark shadow swooped down.

“Arhhhh...*danger...keep away!*” Zazu cawed, flying at Ed and pecking at his eyes.

Ed yelped in distress—and let go of Silas.

The hyena crashed to the ground with a cry of pain, while Zazu kept cawing and swooping down at him, pecking and clawing at his eyes, driving him away.

That bought Silas a chance.

He scrambled up the rope, using his feet to dig into the cliffside. It crumbled, breaking away and threatening to send him plunging down, but he held on and kept going. Sand and rocks kicked up by his boots tumbled down, also hitting the hyenas.

Between the rocks, sand, and Zazu pecking at them, the hyenas yelped in pain and frustration, then loped away, disappearing from sight.

They were gone...for now.

But if Silas had learned anything about hyenas, they were smart and relentless when they locked on to their prey. They wouldn’t be easily deterred from a meal. But there was more. The strange glowing eyes. The fact that they were on a mission for Scar himself.

They’d be back—this wasn’t over.

Far from it, he feared.

But he had bigger problems, like not falling off this rope. He jerked his gaze away from the ground and finished climbing to the top of the canyon. The twins helped haul him over the edge.

“Whoa, that was close,” Silas huffed, struggling to catch his breath. He flopped over on his back and stared up at the darkening sky, grateful to be on solid ground again. Both he and the staff had escaped the hyenas. Finally, he sat back up.

“Too close,” Natasha said in a grim voice. “Why’d you run away like that?”

“Yeah, it’s dangerous out here,” Timothy added. “You can’t come out here alone.”

They both gave him stern looks. They were worried but also upset he’d abandoned them.

“Scar...he took my brother...” Silas choked out, feeling the guilt steal his voice away.

The twins nodded. “I had a bad feeling...” Natasha said with wide eyes. “I heard Mom talking about the ransom message left in your parents’ room.”

“Yeah, Scar wants the staff,” Timothy said, nodding to it. Somehow, it had survived the climb. Silas reached over and pulled it out from the ties on his pack, thankful he hadn’t lost it.

“But...how’d you find me?” Silas asked, his mind whirring with a million questions.

Using the staff, he got up to his feet.

“Zazu!” Timothy said as the bird fluttered over and alighted on the staff. “He came back, then led us to you. He must’ve spotted you out here.”

“Thanks, Zazu,” Silas said, ruffling his feathers. The bird preened—then flapped and cawed.

“Watch out! Watch out! Danger! Danger!”

They all turned to look right as the hyenas scrambled up to the top of the canyon. They’d taken another route. Their eerie green eyes glowed in the twilight, fixing on them.

“Over there!” Shenzi yelped as the other two followed her, releasing a stream of giggles.

“What...they can talk?” Timothy gasped.

“You can hear it, too?” Silas said, relieved that he wasn’t the only one.

“Loud and clear,” Natasha said. “These aren’t ordinary hyenas. They must work for Scar.”

The hyenas stalked toward them in the dying light. Zazu clung to the staff.

“I am feeling hungry, Shenzi,” Banzai panted. “Did we order a *human* sandwich?”

Shenzi growled and nipped at him. “Scar said to bring the boy with the staff...*unharm*ed.”

“But my stomach’s growling,” Banzai whined. “You hear it? Maybe just a nibble?”

“How ’bout *chicken*?” Shenzi said. “You can eat the bird. But the human cubs go to Scar.”

Ed licked his lips in anticipation and released a peal of maniacal giggles. They kept squabbling with each other.

“Uh, this is our chance,” Silas whispered. While the hyenas were busy bickering about who they would eat first, Silas and the twins took off running with Zazu.

It took the predators a good minute to notice.

But then Banzai perked up and sniffed the air.

“Uh, did you order dinner to go?” he growled.

“No, why?” Shenzi asked.

“Cuz there it goes...” Banzai yelped.

Silas heard the hyenas start chasing after them. They moved like ghosts with eerie green eyes. Whatever they were, they weren’t natural.

Silas and the twins ran faster and wound through the mesas, led by Zazu, who flew ahead and knew the way. He guided them back toward the Pride Lands, even though the light was fading precipitously. Slowly the hyenas lost their trail.

They were almost safe.

But then a dark shadow stepped out onto the trail in front of them, and two more lunged out behind them. Their fearsome eyes glowed with unnatural light. The hyenas had split up and taken a different route, gaining on them and trapping them before they could escape.

“Watch out!” Silas said, skidding to a halt.

They whipped around, but they were surrounded. Zazu circled overhead, cawing forlornly. But there was little he could do to save them

now. The hyenas stalked toward them slowly, watching for any attempt to escape this time. They wouldn't be fooled again by the same trick.

Silas thought they were done for, but he clutched the staff tightly.

"Please...help me..." he prayed.

At first, nothing happened....

But then the staff ignited with red light. Materializing out of the air, the shadowy form of a monkey appeared before him. It resembled a baboon, Silas thought in surprise. The vision overwhelmed everything, transporting him to another realm where there was no danger.

The monkey spoke to him in a deep voice.

It echoed out through the night, blotting everything else out.

"The past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it or learn from it."

The baboon's words emanated not only from his lips, but also from his soul. Silas felt it inside him. Something about it touched his heart and changed him...the guilt seemed to evaporate into smoke...but then, before he could ask what it meant, the baboon vanished.

The vision was gone. But it gave him something.

Courage.

This time it wasn't false bravado—or selfishness to save himself—it was for his friends.

"Leave us alone!" Silas yelled, brandishing the staff and charging at the hyenas.

He thumped Shenzi first in the snout, then whacked Banzai across the back. They both yelped in surprise—but also pain. Finally, he turned to Ed and imitated his loud giggling....

"Heee-heeeee-heheeee!"

Even Ed cringed back in fear from this taste of his own medicine.

They hadn't seen this side of Silas. Before they could recover, he jerked the staff around and moved erratically, trying to make himself seem bigger and scarier. And the whole time, he kept giggling like a maniac.

The hyenas whimpered, then ran away and disappeared into the dark trees.

Silas relaxed, lowering the staff.

This time, he suspected, they wouldn't return so quickly.

"Wow, you chased them away," Natasha said. "How'd you know how to do that?"

“Oh, it was the baboon,” Silas said with a shrug. “Didn’t you see him? He told me what to do...he gave me advice....” He trailed off as he noticed the blank looks on their faces.

“Uh...a baboon?” Timothy said. He scratched his head. “You mean like a monkey?”

“Wait, you didn’t see him?” Silas asked.

“Uh, negative,” the twins replied in tandem.

So that had only been something that Silas conjured—or maybe imagined. The line of what was real and what was supernatural was blurring...fast.

“Well, after the baboon appeared, I realized something about hyenas,” Silas went on. “They’re scavengers, right? And they prey on the weak and injured. Well, there’s another word for that....”

“What’s that?” Timothy asked.

“They’re *cowards*,” Silas said with a satisfied nod. “I just needed to do something unexpected to throw them off and freak them out, and, well...I guess it worked.”

“Wow, that’s brilliant,” Natasha said with a grin.

Silas felt himself blushing. But then he turned serious.

“But it won’t work again. They’re too smart. They’ll regroup soon.”

Zazu flapped over and landed on the staff, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“That’s wild,” Natasha said. “You look like your aunt, with the staff and Zazu.”

“Only a lot *shorter*,” Timothy added.

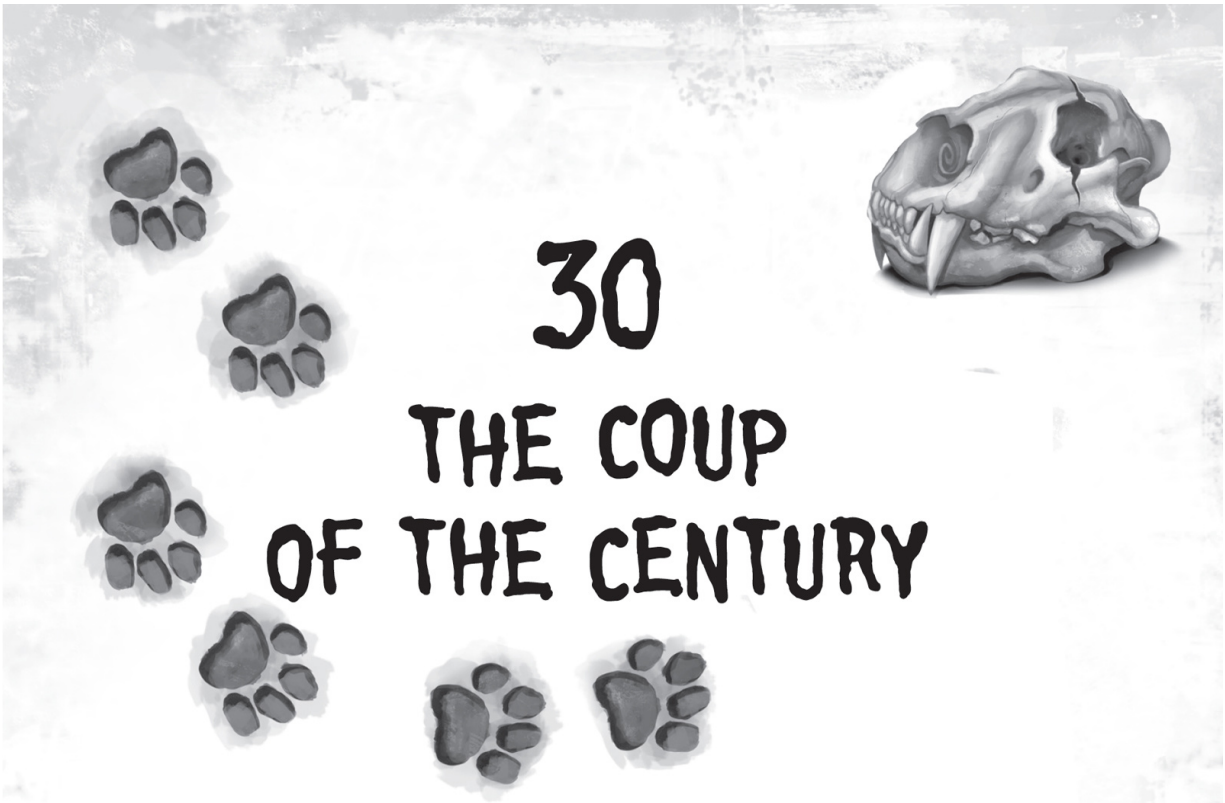
They all laughed, dispersing the tension. But then they looked up. It was almost completely dark, and the hyenas wouldn’t stay away forever. Plus, the ghost of Scar was still loose in the camp.

“Hurry, we need to get back,” Natasha said. “Staying out after dark is dangerous.”

A few minutes later, the sky gave up its last gasps of light, casting the wilderness into thick darkness as they hiked back toward the camp with Zazu leading them.

Silas pulled out his flashlight. He clutched the staff in his other hand. Even though he’d defeated the hyenas, more creatures lurked in the dark. They needed to stay alert and keep moving. But more problems swam in his head. The biggest one of all: George was still missing.

What were they going to do?



A few hours later, Silas and the twins reached the perimeter of the camp. They made good time thanks to Zazu's guidance and Silas's flashlight. They all kept their phones off. The last thing they needed was their parents getting worried. The twins had snuck out. That meant their mom wouldn't notice they were gone until morning anyway.

Plus, they had bigger problems.

The longer George was missing, the more dangerous it became. He was only a baby, after all, and needed constant feeding and attention. Silas started imagining terrible scenarios. Natasha's voice jerked him out of his morbid thoughts.

"So who sabotaged the rope bridge?" she asked, climbing through the slats in the fence.

She paused and looked back at Silas and her brother, still on the other side of the fence.

"We know Scar kidnapped your brother," she went on. "But the accident was *before* he got out."

“Right, I know,” Silas said in frustration. “It’s been driving me crazy. It has to be somebody who wanted to hurt my family...even *kill* them.”

Silas felt a deep chill rush through him at that thought. The twins shared his uneasiness.

“But *who* would want to do such a thing?” Timothy said in a hushed voice. “Pride Rock is a small place. We know everyone around here.”

“My brother’s right,” Natasha said. “We grew up here, remember? Plus, everyone loved your aunt. Why would they hurt her family? Especially when you came to fix up the camp?”

“Exactly. That’s what I can’t figure out, either,” Silas said, feeling frustrated. The more he thought about it, the more it made his head throb.

“But those ropes didn’t saw themselves,” Timothy pointed out. “We found the evidence. That means someone is trying to hurt your family....”

He trailed off. Those words hit them all hard. They were all focused now on the same question: *who was it?*

“I wish we could figure it out,” Natasha said. “Everything just leads us in circles....”

“Circles of...*terror*,” Silas said with a shudder.

Silence fell over their group. They’d reached yet another dead end. Natasha was right. These mysteries only led to more mysteries, not answers.

Silas and Timothy joined Natasha on the other side of the fence, each landing with a soft thud. Silas felt relief at the sight of the gravel trail, signs that pointed back to the campgrounds, and soft light from the buildings in the distance.

They’d made it back to civilization—if you could call a wilderness camp civilized. He had a much different perspective, however, now that he’d ventured outside of the Pride Lands.

They trekked back, passing the sign that pointed away from the camp and read ELEPHANT GRAVEYARD. Silas perked up.

“Wait, I’ve got an idea. There’s one person who doesn’t want my family here.”

“Who?” the twins asked. They all came to a halt. Their eyes fixed on him expectantly.

“*Billie*...” Silas said in a low voice.

The twins looked stunned.

“But...why?” Natasha said, trading bewildered looks with her brother. “She’s a bit strange. That’s true...but does that mean she’s dangerous?”

Quickly, Silas told them about how Billie tried to scare them off when they first arrived in town. “She warned us that bad things happen to folks up here.”

Natasha shrugged. “Like we said, that’s just Billie being superstitious. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Well, that’s not all,” Silas said. “By the shed, I caught her telling Archie that she doesn’t want my family here. She called us *outsiders*. She thinks a local should run the camp.”

That had a bigger impact.

“Really? She said that?” Natasha said, sounding more uncertain.

“Yup, I’m sure of it,” Silas said. “Archie and your mom tried to convince her otherwise—”

“Wait, is that the same day Zazu lost it at Billie?” Timothy jumped in. “Remember how Mom made us fetch him and bring him home?”

“Oh, right,” Natasha said. “That wasn’t like him. Sure, he caws a lot of gibberish. But he doesn’t attack people, just hyenas,” she added with a wink.

“Wow. You’re right,” Silas said. “I almost forgot about that part. Billie also yelled at Zazu, saying somebody needed to ‘shut that bird up.’”

The twins looked upset.

“Oh, that’s terrible,” Natasha said, reaching up to stroke the parrot perched on the staff.

Silas nodded. “Maybe Billie kidnapped Zazu? Maybe he was trying to warn us about her?”

The parrot bobbed his head and cawed his warning, “*Scarlett... danger...danger...watch out! Beware the arch...danger danger...keep out!*”

Silas took that in.

“Wasn’t Zazu with my aunt the day she died?” Silas asked, putting it together. “Maybe he saw Billie do something to hurt my aunt....”

His words dried up. Zazu chirped and bounced on the staff in alarm.

“*Scarlett...danger...keep out!*”

“Look, it all sounds fishy,” Natasha said, thinking it over. “But we need proof to connect Billie to the accident. All we have is the rusty saw...and Zazu’s riddle. But nobody will believe that.”

“You’re right,” Silas said. “Maybe somebody else knows something we don’t know?”

“But who can we trust?” Natasha said. “I doubt my mom will believe us. She’s friends with Billie.”

“Yeah, she’d probably get upset,” Timothy added, “and ground us for like a million years....”

“Same here,” Silas said. “I’m not sure my parents would believe me, either. Plus, I’m probably gonna get in so much trouble for running away.”

“Yeah, we’d all be in kid jail,” Timothy said. “Like Zazu, when he’s locked up in his cage.”

“*Kid jail...*” Zazu cawed, making them smile.

“But who, then?” Natasha asked.

After a long moment, Silas said, “Archie...He was really close to my aunt, right? That means he’d want to find out if somebody tried to hurt her. He’s also been really nice to me since we moved here.”

“Good idea,” Natasha said. “Let’s go.”



They snuck though the camp, dimming the flashlight, heading to Archie's cabin. On the way, Zazu grew restless, dancing around, then finally taking off and fluttering up to a nearby tree.

"Guess he's happy to be home," Timothy said, looking for Zazu in the trees. The parrot sat on a high branch, preening and watching them.

They turned away and reached Archie's cabin, knocking on the door.

Then...they waited....

But nobody answered.

No rustling inside, either. Silas tried knocking again. Then he lowered his hand.

"Where is he?" he whispered.

The cabin lights were out, but surely the knocking would wake him up. They peered through the window—but his cabin was empty.

He was gone.

"That's strange," Natasha whispered back. "Where would he go this late at night?"

“Over there...” Timothy said.

He pointed to the groundskeeper’s shed, which loomed behind the cabin. A dim light glowed from inside, and the door was cracked open slightly.

“Maybe he couldn’t sleep,” Silas said, brightening at the thought of someone they could trust. “And decided to get a head start on work.”

“That makes sense,” Natasha agreed. “He’s always working on all sorts of projects.”

They headed over to the shed, crossing behind the cabin. When they reached the door, Silas rapped on it with the staff...and then it creaked open....

“Hey, Archie...” he started, expecting the groundskeeper to be inside working away.

But the shed was deserted.

“Where could he be?” Natasha asked. “It’s not like him to leave the light on like that.”

“Do you think Scar got him?” Timothy asked. “Or maybe the hyenas?”

“Only one way to find out,” Silas said, trying to sound brave but failing miserably. His voice shook with fear. “Hurry, maybe there’s a clue to where he went.”

Silas left the staff and his backpack by the entrance as they stepped inside.

A bare bulb hung from the ceiling, illuminating the large work space. It was shadowy and dusty, filled with a lawnmower, edger, bags of gravel and fertilizer, and a whole wall with tools hanging on it. White outlines showed where each tool belonged.

The shed was a bit dirty but well organized, much like the old groundskeeper himself.

“Maybe he’ll be back soon,” Silas said hopefully. They continued inside and started looking around. Maybe there’d be a clue as to where he went.

Timothy pointed at the back wall, where all the tools were hanging on a board.

“Look, over there...”

They followed his gesture. The spot where the saw would hang with the other tools...

It was empty.

Only the outline remained. Silas ran his fingers over it, realizing it matched the shape of the rusty saw they found hidden by the bridge... *exactly*.

His eyes widened as his heart raced faster. And then he spotted something else.

“Look...feathers...” He gulped, pointing under the workbench. The trail led away from it. They followed the feathers, discovering something covered with a dirty sheet shoved in the corner. Timothy lifted it up to reveal— An old metal birdcage.

It was filled with feathers—and not just any feathers.

Timothy picked one up and examined it closer. They were gray and matched their parrot.

“That means Archie must have kidnapped Zazu,” Silas said with a start. “But why?”

Natasha called to them. She was sifting through papers left on the work bench.

“Over here...it gets *worse*.”

Silas jerked his head over.

Dread seeped through him, freezing his veins. Goose bumps pricked his skin. What could be *worse* than what they already found?

They rushed over to her side. And that was when they saw it: illuminated by the bulb overhead were journals and notes filled with writing.

Silas scanned the crumpled, ink-stained pages, as angry words leapt out at him— *The Legend of Scar...locked up...release him from the chest... return the camp to the rightful heir...not outsiders...I should be king undisputed!...How dare Scarlett leave the camp to her long-lost brother?... She promised me that I'd inherit all of Pride Rock...I should be the king undisputed...not that monkey's brother!*

Silas backed up, his head swimming with those treacherous writings.

One thing he knew: they had to get out of there...and fast.

“This means it was Archie all along,” Silas said as the pieces tumbled together. His mouth went dry with fear, but he forced the words out.

“He’s the one who told me about the Elephant Graveyard...he tampered with the bridge...he gave me the staff so I’d release the ghost of Scar...he wanted to inherit the camp from Aunt Scarlett.”

“What? I don’t believe it,” Natasha said in a shaky voice. “Wait, I’ll bet he’s the one who put the chest in your closet...knowing you’d find it.”

All the mysteries started to make terrible sense. One horrifying thought hit them all at once. Timothy was the first to say it.

“Do you think...he’s the one who hurt your aunt?”

Those words hit them all hard. Silas felt his knees buckle and threaten to give out.

“*Danger...beware the arch...*” Natasha repeated the familiar warning. “I think Zazu was trying to warn us. He was with your aunt the day she died. That means Zazu witnessed everything.”

Silas met her gaze.

“You’re right. Zazu didn’t mean *arch* as in the arch by the bridge. He meant *Arch* as in *Archie*. He was trying to warn us this whole time—”

A dark shadow stretched into the shed, and a furious voice hissed out at them.

“And you brats should’ve listened!”



Archie towered over them, holding a bucket of nails and a hammer, but it looked more like a weapon than a tool. His eyes narrowed as he saw his journal and scribblings with his treacherous plot.

Silas knew they were caught red-handed. His eyes darted to the door with the staff just beyond it. He'd left it propped by the door. *How foolish!* he thought in despair.

"But why would you hurt her?" Silas stammered as they backed away from the groundskeeper. Shock rushed through him.

Archie twisted his face up with rage. "Scarlett promised me the camp! I was supposed to inherit it. But out of nowhere, she changed her mind."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Silas said. They tried to back up more, but they were trapped.

Archie spat out a derisive laugh. He sounded deranged and unhinged. His usually friendly face was now devoid of all kindness, while his stringy, long hair had come out of his bun and looked untamed. He raised the hammer like a weapon.

His beady eyes bored into them—

“She got a guilty conscience,” he said in a furious voice. “Scarlett told me... ‘My nephew wants to be a camper. And my brother’s having a hard time and lost his job. I think the camp should stay in my family. I’m going to leave it to him.’”

“It was all because of me,” Silas said, remembering how he had wanted to be a camper.

His father had promised to call his sister about it. That phone call must have triggered this tragic chain of events—and led to his aunt’s death.

“Can you believe it?” Archie snapped, wheeling around on them with the hammer. “I worked for her for years keeping this camp going! Even after Scarlett got a bit eccentric and locked up the camp’s spirit, I stuck it out and tried to bring it back.”

“Scar,” Silas said. “You mean Scar.”

Archie raised his eyebrows. “Oh, yes...be prepared! Your aunt never should’ve locked him up.” He paced around, standing between them and the door that would allow them to escape.

“What did you do?” Natasha said, finding her voice, though it came out shaky.

“You hurt Scarlett?” Timothy added in a small voice that sounded broken.

They both looked on the verge of tears. But Silas tried to stay calm. If they were going to have any chance of escaping, he had to focus—and keep Archie talking, no matter what.

The groundskeeper kept ranting and pacing, waving the hammer around. Knocked by it, the bare bulb overhead swayed, making the shadows jerk and dance around the shed.

“She didn’t leave me any choice,” Archie went on. “I suggested we go on a hike to our favorite spot—the Elephant Graveyard. Wasn’t too difficult to rig a trap...and, well, *an unfortunate accident*.”

They all gasped in shock.

Knowing what had happened was one thing, but hearing his confession hit harder.

Archie aimed the hammer at Silas. “But I was too late—she’d already changed her will,” he said with an incredulous shake of his head. “And I was left with a *monkey’s brother*.”

Those last words flew out his mouth like daggers, as his face contorted with hatred and menace, rendering him almost unrecognizable.

“So when my family showed up here,” Silas said, trying to keep him talking. They were still trapped—Archie stood between them and the door. “You decided to cause another accident....”

“If only those two runts hadn’t intervened...”

He raised his hammer and glared at the twins as they cowered back from the groundskeeper in fear. “You’ve been trouble since the day you were born!” His shadow stretched out, enveloping them in his darkness. The bulb overhead swayed even more.

“Right, and when that didn’t work,” Silas said, putting all the pieces together, but also trying to keep Archie distracted and take his focus off the twins, “you decided to try something else and trick me into unleashing Scar with the staff. You figured out that my aunt wasn’t crazy after all. The ghost of a treacherous lion really did haunt the camp.”

Archie raised the hammer, making them all flinch. But their backs were against the wall.

There was nowhere to run or hide.

“You betcha, and it worked like a charm,” Archie said, delighting in his plan. “That damn fool bird almost ruined it that day the townsfolk came up. Had to get rid of him, too. But he escaped from my shed.” He gestured to the feathers. “Luckily, Scar started the job to get rid of your family, but now it looks like I’ll have to finish it for him. If both their kids vanish”—he blew on his fingers, like a puff of smoke—“your folks will be outta here in no time. And the twins? Well, I’m sorry you got involved....”

But he didn’t sound that sorry.

Archie raised the hammer to attack them. His eyes took on a greenish glow, lighting up with unnatural fire. The curse of Scar was alive inside him now.

This was it—how could they escape?



“Beware...the arch! Danger...Danger!”

Zazu burst through the door and flew at Archie, clawing at his eyes and blinding him momentarily. He screamed and swung his hammer wildly, barely missing Zazu as the bird dodged the blow.

“Hurry, run!” Silas said, grabbing the twins and pushing them toward the door.

Zazu clawed at Archie again while they bolted outside. Archie groaned and swung the hammer, but missed the parrot by mere inches.

But Zazu did lose a few feathers. They fluttered down over the shed like fresh snowfall.

“Zazu, come on!” Silas yelled back.

The parrot cawed and flew through the door. Archie was still staggering around. But he would soon recover. They had to get moving.

But...

The staff.

“What’re you doing?” Natasha yelled.

Silas didn't have a choice. The staff was the key to saving his brother's life. He ran back toward the shed and grabbed it and his backpack—but Archie heard him coming.

Whoosh.

The hammer flew through the air at him.

Silas ducked, and it landed in the gravel with a soft thunk at his feet. But it had almost taken his head off. If Archie wasn't half blinded by the parrot, he wouldn't have missed.

That was close...too close.

Archie lurched for the wall with his tools.

Silas didn't wait for more deadly instruments to come flying blindly at him. He grabbed the fallen hammer, slammed the door shut, and slid the hammer through the metal handles.

Bang! Bang!

Archie pounded on the door. He was trapped inside...for now. But Silas knew he'd find a way to escape soon. And he didn't plan to wait around for that to happen.

He dashed down the trail, catching up with the twins. Zazu cawed and led the way, flying ahead and leading them to the rope bridge. They ducked behind an outcropping of sandy rocks. Zazu fluttered down and alighted on the staff.

"Good job, Zazu," Timothy said, stroking his soft feathers. He'd saved their lives.

But then the seriousness of their situation returned. Silence fell over their group. Even Zazu looked worried, fidgeting around. The sun was about to rise. Predawn light pricked at the horizon, casting a dull yellow sheen and chasing the dark skies and stars away.

"What do we do now?" Natasha asked, exchanging worried looks with them.

"The way I see it," Silas said, "we have two major problems...Archie and Scar."

"Right," Natasha agreed. "It's time to tell our parents what we found. I'll take Timothy and go fetch our mother and tell her about Archie."

"Yup, we can call the cops from our cabin," Timothy said. "We have proof, too."

"The saw?" Silas said.

“Exactly,” Natasha said. “We can show the cops. They’ll have to believe us now. Plus, we know he took Zazu. And there’s more evidence in his shed.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Silas said, but then he trailed off, knowing what he had to do next.

Natasha spied the look on his face. “Don’t even think about it! It’s too dangerous. We’re not letting you face him alone.”

“Yeah, wait for us,” Timothy said. “We’ll go with you.”

“No, I have to deal with Scar by myself,” Silas said. “I won’t put you at risk again. I’m the one who released him from the chest. I’ve got the staff... and he’s got my brother.”

The twins took that in. They didn’t like it, but they knew that he had made up his mind.

“What’re you going to do?” Natasha asked in a worried voice.

“Well, he wants the staff, right?” Silas said. “So I’m going to trade it for my brother.”

“Think it’ll work?” Timothy asked hopefully.

“I don’t know,” Silas said, biting his lower lip. Fear surged through him. “He’s really cunning and smart and treacherous. But I don’t have a choice—I have to try.”

“And what happens when he gets that staff?” Natasha said. “He’ll become even more powerful...maybe unstoppable. He could come after all of us next.”

“Right, I’ll think of something,” Silas said, but doubt pooled in his heart. “First, I have to save George. He’s been missing for a whole day....”

In that moment, Silas remembered all the ways George annoyed him. But he remembered the nice parts, too. Them wearing matching “Big Bro” and “Little Bro” shirts. George cooing and giggling with delight when he saw Silas enter his room. All dimples and baby fat and milk burps. Then he remembered his whole family—the four of them—snuggled on the sofa, watching animated movies together. Those were his best memories, now that he thought about it.

“You’re right—go save Gopher,” Natasha said. “I don’t know what I’d do without my brother.”

“Uh, you’d probably feel a whole lot less annoyed on a daily basis,” Timothy said. “But yeah...eventually you’d miss me being around to drive you crazy.”

“You wish,” Natasha said, but then she hugged him. “Love you, too.”

“Ugh, gross,” Timothy mimed. “Get her off me.”

But really, it was clear he loved her, too.

Time was running short. They had to get moving now. The twins waved to Silas but refused to say good-bye, insisting that they’d see him later. *Goodbye* felt too final.

But Silas had a bad feeling about it.

He pulled his gaze off them as they crept toward the camp, keeping a lookout in case Archie got free and came after them again. The campgrounds typically appeared magical in the morning sun.

Usually, sunlight chased away nightmares.

But not that day. Silas forced himself to turn and head in the other direction. Zazu took off from the staff, flying ahead and leading the way. The parrot would take him to Scar. But he already had a feeling he knew where they were heading as they tramped over the bridge.

The Elephant Graveyard.

He held the staff, using it as a walking stick. The staff began to pulse with dim light, growing faster and brighter with each step.

Scar was waiting...Silas could feel it.

Fear tried to claim him, but Silas fought against it. He remembered the baboon who had appeared. *The past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it or learn from it.*

Silas had already tried running away, and that hadn’t fixed anything. In fact, it only made everything worse. He had learned from his mistakes. Now he had to face them.

He also remembered what his father said after the bridge accident. *Courage is how you act when the trouble finds you.* Well, the trouble had certainly found him now.

“Gopher, hang in there,” he said, using the silly nickname. “I’m coming to save you.”

This was his last chance.



The mist clung to the high plateau, casting it into shadow despite the bright sunlit morning.

Silas clutched the staff and trudged deeper into the Elephant Graveyard. The steam cast off from the geothermal vents made it hard to see too far ahead. The staff now glowed bright and strong. That meant—

They were getting closer.

Zazu cawed and swooped ahead, but even he was hard to make out through the mist. It fogged the air. Aside from Zazu, no other creatures dared to sing or make noise. The Elephant Graveyard was desolate and deserted. Something treacherous and terrible lurked in the mist.

It was Scar.

This was the lion's true homeland. Not the bright, sunny expanse of the Pride Lands or the spirited desert of Camp Pride Rock. But if he became the king undisputed—if he claimed dominion over those lands and beyond—they would fall into mist and shadow, just like the Elephant Graveyard.

Zazu cawed, then alighted on a scraggly tree with dead leaves. Somehow the carcass of the tree still stood, planted into the rocky earth like a tribute to what once flourished here before Scar. The parrot would go no farther. He gave Silas one last mournful cry, then tucked his head under his wing as if to say he could stand sentry, but could not continue.

Silas understood this somehow. The staff throbbed and burned even brighter.

It led him onward.

Zazu vanished behind him into the mist, which seemed to swallow anything that entered this realm. But Silas kept going.

The mist cleared, revealing the mouth of a cave tucked into the rock. It led downward, sloping into the earth. Mist like steam billowed out from it.

Silas had a bad feeling about that cave. He swallowed hard, feeling a lump in his throat.

But then he heard it—

A baby crying.

He recognized the rise and fall and shrill cadence. There was no mistaking George. But he sounded weak.

Silas didn't hesitate.

I have to save him!

Clutching the staff, he hurried through the mouth of the cave and into the darkness. The staff grew brighter, lighting the way. He followed the pitiful sound of his brother crying. In the past it had driven him crazy, but now it acted like a beacon.

The farther he went, the mistier and hotter it got. The geothermal vents were clearly active in the cave. The steam fogged his vision and made it hard to see what was right in front of him. His foot caught on a rock, sending him lurching forward.

He caught himself just in time. He stared down at the boiling-hot geyser only a few inches from his face. It bubbled up from the rocks, threatening to blind him.

That was close.

He picked himself up slowly, limping slightly. He'd twisted his ankle, it seemed. But he had to keep going no matter what. The crying grew louder and sounded close now.

He came upon a wide cavern, obscured by the mist that clung to the air. But first he saw—

Two glowing green eyes.

They locked on to Silas and narrowed. Then the mist cleared as a warm draft wafted through the cavern, rustling his clothes and hair.

“You’re late, little cub,” Scar sneered.

The lion lounged on a stone throne at the back of the cavern, looking lazy. But his eyes told a far different story—one of a cunning predator. They darted to the staff.

“Oh, goody, you’ve brought my staff,” he drawled in his sultry, accented voice. He yawned and stretched out. “Forgive me for not leaping for joy. Bad back, you know.”

The mist cleared even more, revealing—

“George,” Silas gasped when he saw him.

His brother was imprisoned in a cage made from the bones of a long-dead animal, probably the rib cage left over from one of Scar’s meals.

George whimpered softly when he saw Silas. He was still wrapped in the same swaddle he was sleeping in when Scar stole him from his bassinet. Tears flowed from his eyes, staining his cherubic cheeks pink, and snot ran from his nose. But otherwise, he looked unharmed.

For now.

Silas breathed a sigh of relief. But it was short-lived.

Anger exploded in his heart like fire.

“Look...he’s just a helpless baby!” Silas yelled at the lion. “It’s not fair...let him go.”

“Life’s not fair, is it?” Scar said in his lilting tone. He flicked his paw lazily toward George, looking bored. Then, with a groan, he climbed to his feet and started pacing. His face contorted into an evil leer. “You got my message, I see?”

“Yes, I brought you the staff,” Silas said and held it up. “But my aunt locked you away for a reason. She knew you were evil and would eventually destroy her camp.”

“Oh, she was so *untrusting*,” Scar said. “Just like my older brother. Pity, I could’ve helped her.”

“Helped her?” Silas scoffed. “I read about what you did to your brother. You only help yourself.”

Scar swiped at Silas—

But the staff flared and drove the lion away with a flash of light. He whined and gnashed his teeth, but he stayed back for now. That was why

Scar needed Silas to bring the staff to him, and why he couldn't just take it. Scar licked his injured paw with a mournful expression.

"Oh my, if my big brother doesn't haunt me...even from the grave."

Scar stalked over to the baby in his bone cage. The lion's green eyes glinted with menace. The baby whimpered softly. One swipe of a giant clawed paw and the lion could end George's life.

The message was clear.

"Your brother haunts you for a reason," Silas said, wielding his aunt's staff like the formidable weapon that it was. "You caused his death. He was a great king, unlike you—"

"I'm ten times the king my brother, Mufasa, was!" Scar roared in anger, thrashing at the air. "And once I get that staff, I shall prove it!"

"You want this staff?" Silas repeated.

"The hyenas were supposed to bring it to me," Scar said with a roll of his eyes. "I'm surrounded by idiots! If you want something done right, I suppose, you have to do it yourself."

"So you kidnapped my baby brother?"

"Indeed," Scar retorted. "So predictable! I knew you'd come for the little cub."

"I just have one question," Silas asked. "Why do you want this staff so badly?"

"Oh, my powers are very strong," Scar said. "But sadly, they're limited to the campgrounds. But with Rafiki's staff...let's just say I can become the king undisputed and rule over all the lands."

"Rafiki?" Silas said, intentionally stalling. His mind was whirring, trying to find a way out of this mess—and a way to save his brother.

Scar let out an annoyed sigh. "Oh, he was a shaman of sorts...my poor deceased brother's closest advisor...but more of a baboon, if you ask me." Then he narrowed his eyes. "Don't worry your little head about him. All that matters is...that staff."

Silas flinched back and glanced at George. Scar's words made him hesitate.

Giving the staff to Scar would put everyone in danger. But then George cried again. His head flopped forward. He was weak and exhausted. Silas knew he didn't have a choice.

"Stop stalling. The baby...for the staff," Scar said. "Little prince, do we have a deal?"

Silas stared the lion down. His fear, his cowardice—they told him to run away. But he fought back against it. For the first time, he realized that he was brave. Moreover, it wasn't something that he'd had to learn. It had been inside him this whole time. He just hadn't known it.

"We have a deal—on one condition," Silas said, keeping his voice steady. Lions preyed on weakness, he knew. And like hyenas, they scavenged when they could.

"Oh, what's that, little prince?" Scar said, raising his eyebrows in an exaggerated expression. "You have more demands, I see? Such a tiring negotiation...but do go on."

"You have to promise to leave my family and friends alone," Silas said. "You won't harm any of us. Oh, and one more thing. You have to take care of Archie, too."

"Oh, poor Archie? Did you have a falling out?" Scar said with an evil grin. "You want him..." Scar dragged his claw across his neck.

The meaning was clear. Silas nodded with a grim look. He knew it was wrong, but Archie was slippery and couldn't be trusted. They had evidence linking him to Scarlett's murder, but it was possible Archie could still worm his way out of getting caught. Silas couldn't risk that.

"Do we have a deal?" he asked.

"Yes, quid pro quo," Scar said in a bored voice. "Don't worry. I won't touch a hair on your pretty little head."

"Or my family?" Silas said. "Or any of my friends at the camp?"

The staff pulsed with red light. It was a warning. But then baby George cried weakly. Silas didn't have much time left. He had to save his brother. This was all his fault.

He had to make it right.

This was his last chance.

But still Silas kept the staff. From reading the book *The Legend of Scar*, he knew that he couldn't trust the lion. "Prove it...let my brother go first and then I'll give you the staff."

"A freebie?" Scar said with a derisive snort. "Why does everyone want things for free these days?"

"More like a gesture of goodwill," Silas countered, holding his gaze.

"Indeed, as you wish," Scar said, rolling his eyes. "But any funny business—and the deal is off. Consider it *claw enforcement*," he said, and then smirked with an evil leer.

With that, Scar slapped his paw against the ground. Red light swirled around George, enveloping the baby completely, and then he vanished in a puff of smoke.

“Back to his bassinet...” Scar said. “Just like nothing ever happened to the little cub...”

But Silas clutched the staff and backed away, unwilling to release it.

“Prove it,” he demanded.

“Don’t trust me?” Scar said. “Go ahead...talk to your mommy...give her a call....”

Silas pulled out his phone and powered it on. It lit up with a million missed calls and texts, all from his parents. He was surprised it had a signal.

He quickly dialed his mother.

She picked up immediately. “Where are you?” she started—but Silas cut her off quickly.

“Mom, did you check your room...George...is he back home?”

His mother let out a startled cry. “My baby, he’s back, he’s safe, oh thank God...”

Silas could hear George crying in the background. “Okay, Mom, I promise...I’ll be home soon.”

Silas hung up—Scar had kept his deal. Still, Silas hesitated, but then he held out the staff to the lion. If he backed out of their deal now, then Scar could hurt his brother and family again. This was the only way that he could save them from the conniving lion.

“Here, take it,” Silas said. “You kept true to your word, now I’ll keep true to mine.”

Scar reached out and took the staff, grabbing it in his mouth. It lit up with ruby light, but this time the power flowed into the ghostly lion. Scar grew even more powerful. His eyes glowed brighter, giving him a haunted appearance. He roared out with his newfound power.

“Now I shall be king undisputed! Not just of Pride Rock, but of all the realms beyond!”

Holding the staff in his deadly jaws, Scar stalked from the cave, leaving Silas behind...unharméd. Silas watched him leave, feeling both afraid but also relieved. He did it. He saved his family...this nightmare was finally over. With his last strength, he stumbled toward the cave’s entrance. Now that he didn’t have the staff, it was like all his energy had drained away.

He couldn't believe it. For the first time in his life, he didn't feel like a scaredy-cat anymore. His terrible nickname no longer held any sway over him. He had crossed the Pride Lands and reached the Elephant Graveyard. And he had faced off against Scar—and rescued his baby brother. George was safe at home with his parents. He perked up at that thought.

He couldn't wait to join them back at the cabin, where they could be a family together again. He realized something else amazing. He was actually looking forward to spending time with George—maybe for the first time. The thought of the silly smile on his brother's face when he giggled—and, yes, when he burped—brought a grin to Silas's face.

He thought of all the games they could play together when George got a little older and started walking and talking. They'd be just like his friends back home and their siblings, or like the twins, except with less bickering over fractions. All he had to do was get back home, safe and sound. That shouldn't be so hard. Scar had promised not to harm him.

The exit loomed ahead, shrouded in mist but promising escape. Silas hurried toward it. Suddenly, three dark figures appeared in shadow just outside of the cave. Eerie laughter echoed through the cave.

He skidded to a halt, his heart leaping into his chest.

But there was no mistaking what he heard.

“Heee-hehe-hehhhheehhe!”



“No, this can’t be...” Silas gasped.

There was no mistaking that horrible giggling. The mist cleared, revealing the three hyenas. They stood in front of Scar, blocking the only escape.

“Hey, boss, we’re hungry,” Shenzi whined.

“Yeah, we’ve got a bone to pick with you!” Banzai agreed, licking his lips hungrily.

“It’s dinnertime, but we ain’t got no stinkin’ dinner!” Shenzi added.

“You promised...”

Ed just stood there and giggled. Somehow, that was even more terrifying. Scar let out a bored sigh—and set the staff down at his feet. His green eyes flicked to Silas.

“Oh, well, in that case...the prince is all yours.”

The hyenas giggled excitedly and bowed down together in front of Scar.

“Long live the king!”

Then, the hungry hyenas turned to the cave's entrance. They stalked toward Silas with their hackles raised and mouths watering fiercely. He backed away from them in terror.

"No, we had a deal! Scar...you promised you wouldn't hurt me...or my family!"

Scar turned back and leered. His green eyes glowed. "Oh, I said *I* wouldn't touch a hair on your little head. But that doesn't mean they won't."

With that terrible proclamation, Scar stalked off toward the Pride Lands with Rafiki's staff.

He was the king undisputed.

But Silas remained trapped in the cave as the dark shadows of the hyenas encroached on him. Worse yet, without the staff to protect him, he felt weak and exhausted. He hadn't slept in two days. His legs buckled in defeat as he collapsed to the ground.

All the energy leaked out of him.

The hyenas licked their lips with their long tongues, looking ravenous. Their sharp teeth glinted in the dim light. Without the staff, the cave fell into darkness, blanketed by the mist.

"Come here...little prince," Shenzi taunted, stalking toward him with sharp eyes.

"Oh, I always wanted to feast on royalty," Banzai added. "I bet it tastes richer."

They all giggled horribly.

Silas stammered and cried out. "No...please...don't hurt me."

But even his voice came out weak. This time, nobody was there to save him.

The hyenas giggled like creepy children and intoned, "Long live King Scar!"

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STRANGE) is a graduate of Harvard University and a creative writing instructor. She began her career working in Hollywood on many films, including the Lord of the Rings series and *The Golden Compass*. She lives and writes in LA, where she's hard at work on her next book. You can find her on Twitter [@JenniferBrody](#), and Instagram and Facebook [@JenniferBrodyWriter](#).